THE VALUE OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION
FOR PSYCHOLOGY

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Flávio Antônio da Silva Dontal

Georgetown University
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Flávio Antônio da Silva Dontal

Mentor: William J. O’Brien, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is considered one of the sacraments of healing due to the peace and consolation it brings to the sinner-confession when divine absolution is granted by means of the actions of the priest after a confession with a truly contrite heart. It is the traditional Catholic belief that the dispensation of the sacrament contributes to the well-being of the individuals who believe in and practice it, once it helps people achieve a greater sense of self-identity and also tighter and more cohesive community threads.

In this thesis, we demonstrate the truth of the sacramental character of confession to Christianity, based on its biblical foundations and on the tradition consolidated in Roman Catholicism. We also expound the psychological validity of its practice according to Carl Gustav Jung and Orval Hobart Mowrer. We show how Lutheran theology challenged and destroyed the sacramental essence of confession and led to the practical disappearance of confession in Protestantism. The consequences of such near extinction are pointed out in the end of the thesis, through arguments by Jung and Mowrer and the demonstration of the beneficial effects of the practice of the Sacrament of Penance and
Reconciliation to Catholic individuals, benefits of which Protestant communities are deprived.
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INTRODUCTION

Lord, Thou knowest. Have I not confessed against myself my transgressions unto Thee, and Thou, my God, hast forgiven the iniquity of my heart? I contend not in judgment with Thee, who art the truth; I fear to deceive myself; lest mine iniquity lie unto itself.

— Saint Augustine
The Confessions

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is considered a sacrament of healing by Roman Catholic theology, for it promotes reconciliation with God and brings, as effects of its dispensation, peace and consolation to those who receive it with a contrite heart. We assume this as a premise and as a starting point, and try to go further into the verification of the beneficial effects not only to the soul but to the mind of those who practice the sacrament; after all a sacrament is a gift to make man happy in this life too.

The first step toward such investigation is to establish the definition of what a sacrament is. This search begins with an attempt to discover the roots of the word, in order to demonstrate that, since the very beginning, the usage of the word sacramentum and the corresponding term has been associated with some religious and symbolic meaning, connected to elements not seen and not completely understood by man. It proceeds with the examination of the Catholic understanding of the sacraments, its origins, biblical sources, essential components, and doctrinal development. Through this, our aim is to provide an exposition of the long and sedimented tradition formed by Catholicism in the appreciation of the sacramental rites and how such rites are able to provide guidance throughout human life, a function that is especially explained by the indispensable Thomas Aquinas, with his lessons about the purposes of the sacraments.
The first Chapter continues with a second section dedicated to the definition of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and a brief history of it until the Reformation, when Lutheranism and other Protestant denominations challenged the sacramental character of confession. This section begins with an examination of the biblical foundations of the sacrament and proceeds with the demonstration of its nature and structure, with a distinction between internal and external penance, and the roles of the priest and the sinner-confessor. The last part of the section contains a brief history of the Sacrament of Penance until the Reformation. It represents our attempt to expound the development of the sacrament through time and, with special attention, clarify the origins of the institution of indulgences, which was the cause of abuses that motivated much of the Reformation movement.

Chapter Two is an effort to demonstrate the value of the act of confessing for psychology. It is our task to use scientific language and concepts in order to understanding the phenomenon of confession in the human mind and psyche: what the act of confessing means; why humans need to confess; how it works in the psyche; what is a catharsis; the role of the shadow, sin and repression. Our expectation is to provide a feasible scientific description for the tangible part of the sacramental reality, which is expounded in the first sections of Chapter One. In this attempt, we make use of two valuable and essential references. The first is Carl Gustav Jung, who recognized confession as the first step in any treatment of the soul and mind. The second reference is Orval Hobart Mowrer, whose ideas about sin and the imperative of confession brought
about a revision of the role of confession in many Protestant Christian denominations in
the twentieth century.

Having demonstrated the character of sacramental confession and the theoretical
confirmation of the psychological value of confession in the first two chapters, we
proceed in Chapter Three with an exposition of the Lutheran view of sacraments and
confession. We explain how Luther’s theories about the sacraments led to the loss of the
sacramental character of confession in Protestantism, especially due to his idea of
justification by faith alone, which, literally understood, could by means of an extreme
interpretation lead to the complete abandonment of any sacrament. The chapter ends with
a section dedicated to an assessment of the decline and practical disappearance of
confession in Protestantism.

Chapter Four is an effort to demonstrate the actual psychological effects of
sacramental confession. We begin with theory, and resort to Jung’s criticism of
Protestantism and the loss of symbolic life caused by the suppression of the sacramental
color of its rites and how such loss leads to a less structured human life. We also
expound Jung’s argument, corroborated by Mowrer, about the rise of human anxiety due
to the absence of proper religious tools to deal with guilt. We then continue with a
digression into sociology and a consideration of the different rates of incidence of suicide
among Catholics and Protestants. We end this study with a collection of empirical
reseaches on the psychological effects of the dispensation of the Sacrament of Penance
and Reconciliation and how it contributes to the well-being of human psyche. Since we
consider all the examples provided a strong and valid proof of sacramental confession, we reaffirm in the end our initial belief about the value of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.
CHAPTER ONE
THE SACRAMENT OF Penance AND RECONCILIATION

She said: “Hadst thou kept silence, or denied
What thou hast now confessed, thy crime would still
Be known; He knows, by whom the cause is tried;

But when the prisoner’s mouth is quick to spill
His own sin forth, then, in our court up there,
Backward against the edge we turn the wheel.”

Beatrice to Dante
Purgatory, Canto XXXI, 37-42

I. Definition of Sacrament

I.A. The Word Sacrament

The word sacrament comes from the Latin vocable sacramentum, a term with
varied original meanings. The word could mean, in Ancient Rome, a guarantee sum
deposited by all litigants of a lawsuit, where the loser was obliged to forfeit the money to
the State.¹ Sacramentum could also mean a military oath² of allegiance, sworn by a
Roman soldier. In both cases, the word had a likely religious significance. As a legal
deposit guarantee, at least, the money (summa sacramenti) was used for religious
purposes and as a guarantee that the loser in a litigation would cleanse his faults against
the gods due to his not telling the truth — established by the judge of the case — in a
judicial dispute.³ Regarding the legal and religious signification, the German romanist
Max Kaser provides interesting information about the bases that lead to the association of

¹ The Oxford Classical Dictionary, 2d ed. s.v. “Sacramentum (Legal)” (New York: Oxford

2012).

³ Max Kaser, Direito Privado Romano, trans. into Portuguese by Samuel Rodrigues and Ferdinand
Hämmerle (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1999), 435-436.
a sacramentum with a religious deed. According to him, in a litigation, the provocatio sacramento was a kind of “gambling,” in which each of the litigants had to deposit a certain amount of money (summa sacramenti), that the loser disputant would yield to the public treasure. Such judicial gambling was explained by ancient religious beliefs. As a sacramentum in many situations meant an oath, as the one made by soldiers, it is believed that in ancient times the litigants would make their declarations stronger by means of a solemn oath to a divinity. The oath, however, was a self-imposed curse, for if the initial solemn declaration of rights made by the litigant was proved false, he would be submitted to punishment from the divinity to whom he had solemnly sworn at the beginning of the litigation. In order to avoid such punishment from the divine, the litigants would deposit an expiatory contribution (picaulum) that, given to the god or to the pontiff of its temple, would bring divine absolution to the “liar litigant.”

Johann Auer points out that Tertullian (Carthage, c. 160-c. 220) (who is considered by many the father of Christian Latin or, at least, Theological Latin) in the North of Africa used the word with many different meanings, from initiation rites and celebrations to a divine plan. Particular value, though, was given to the signification of a “pledge of allegiance,” so that Tertullian “applied sacramentum especially to the promises of baptism and thereby he lay the foundation for the theological term

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4 Ibid.

‘sacrament’ in the current sense.”⁶ Due to Tertullian’s influence, sacramentum became the conventional term to designate the main rites of the Western Church in the northern areas of Africa.

The word sacramentum is also related to the noun sacrum, which means sacred object, a religious rite, secret or mystery,⁷ as well as to the adjective sacer, sacred, hallowed, consecrated to a deity.⁸ Sacramentum is also related to the Greek mysterion that led to the Latin neologism mysterium. The vocable was preferred in the European part of the Roman Empire, and its “usage united the Greek sense of ‘secret teaching’ and ‘sacred action.’”⁹

Auer thus indicates:

[…] in the two Latin words for sacrament there were combined the Greek sense (God’s hidden workings) and the Roman sense (human assent and moral duty toward the deity). This word sacramentum was supposed to express not only the fact that what had heretofore remained hidden (‘mystery’) has now been revealed […], but much more the reality that our salvation consists of living, acting, and having our existence in Christ.¹⁰

It is worth noting that the interpretation of the words mysterium and sacramentum remained wide and varied until the twelfth century, when the meaning became more

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¹⁰ Ibid., 11.
associated with the seven celebrations currently recognized as sacraments by the Catholic Church as instituted by Christ himself.¹¹

I.B.  The Definition of Sacrament

In order to better understand the concept of sacrament, we find it worth presenting a brief evolution of the ideas elaborated by the most important theologians of the Church, following the work of two authors: Johann Auer¹² and Bernard Leeming.¹³ Having said that, we should begin by noting that, in spite of the various contributions to the clarification of the idea of sacraments made by early Christians, especially Tertullian, it is Saint Augustine (354-430), who is to be recognized as founder of sacramental theology.¹⁴ Augustine presented the seminal distinction between the “visible rite and invisible effect,” the first being named *signum*, the second *res sacramenti*. This terminology brought about crucial notions for the definition of sacrament, understood by the Church as constituted by two components: matter (*materia*) and form (*forma*). The notion of *signum* could be found in *The City of God* with a mention of the argument that:

¹¹ Ibid., 11.

¹² Johann Auer (1910-1989) was a Bavarian Catholic priest and theologian with special interest in the theology of grace. He became a university professor at Munich in 1947. From 1950 to 1968 he was professor of dogmatics and the history of dogma at the University of Bonn. In 1968, he assumed a position at the University of Regensburg. With Joseph Ratzinger he organized the series of books *Dogmatic Theology*, published in the USA by The Catholic University of America Press.

¹³ Bernard Leeming was Professor of Dogmatic Theology at Heythrop College. His work *Principles of Sacramental Theology* was acclaimed as a valuable contribution to the study of the Catholic theology in the 20th century. In the book he emphasizes the essential relation of the sacraments with the Mystical Body of the Church, in opposition to the individualism of Reformation and Counter-Reformation. The book is also said to put special attention on the symbolic reality of the sacrament. E. L. Mascall, review of *Principles of Sacramental Theology*, by Bernard Leeming, *The Journal of Theological Studies, New Series* 8, no. 2 (October 1957): 387-389.

“Sacrificium ergo uisibile inuisibilis sacrificii sacramentum id est sacrum signum est”: “A sacrifice, therefore, is the visible sacrament or sacred sign of an invisible sacrifice.”¹⁵ (De Civ. Dei, 10.5). The idea of res sacramenti, in its turn, might be elaborated from citations such as “nimis autem longum est, convenienter disputare de varietate signorum, quae eum ad res divinas pertinent, Sacramenta appellantur”: “It would, however, take too long to discuss with adequate fullness the differences between the symbolic actions of former and present times, which, because of their pertaining to divine things, are called sacraments.”¹⁶ (Ep. 138.7: PL 33,527). A very clear distinction between the visual elements of the rite and the invisible effects that provide a “spiritual fruit” to humans can be seen in Saint Augustine’s attempt to instruct his audience about the nature of the sacrament in his Sermon 272. There he states: “Ista, fratres, ideo dicuntur Sacramenta, quia in eis aliud videtur, aliud intelligitur. Quod videtur, speciem habet corporalem, quod intelligitur, fructum habet spiritualem”: “The reason these things, brothers and sisters, are called sacraments is that in them one thing is seen, another is to be understood. What can be seen has a bodily appearance, what is to be understood provides spiritual fruit.”¹⁷ (Sermo 272: PL 38,1247).


Saint Augustine is furthermore considered responsible for the distinction between “word” and “element” as components of the sacramental sign, based on his comment on John and the rite of baptism: “Accedit verbum ad elementum, et fit Sacramentum, etiam ipsum tanquam visibile verbum”: “The word is added to the element, and there results the Sacrament, as if itself also a kind of visible word”\textsuperscript{18} (\textit{In Ioh hom.} 80.2: PL 35,1840).

Auer also points out the contribution made by Augustine with reference to the institution of the sacraments by Christ Himself, based on his comments on the validity of Baptism in his disputations against the Donatists. In Letter 89 (a.D. 406), Augustine clearly states that, God being through \textit{Christ himself the instituter} of the sacrament (Baptism), it does not matter whether the sacrament is administered by an honest or a dishonest minister, for “whoever the man be, and whatever office he bear who administers the ordinance, it is not he who baptizes,— \textit{that is the work of Him upon whom the dove descended}”\textsuperscript{19} (Ep. 89.5) (emphasis added) — “\textit{super quem columba descendit, ipse est qui baptizat}” (PL 33,311). Augustine’s argument for the divine institution of the sacrament is based on John 1:33, where the Apostle gives his instructions: “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.”\textsuperscript{20}


Augustine’s emphasis on the institution of the sacraments by Christ is, moreover, present in his remark on the Psalms, where he reiterates the idea that the Church and the sacrament flowed from Christ’s body, when He “fell asleep” (died) on the Cross: “Quando de latere Christi sacramenta Ecclesiae profluerunt? Cum dormiret in cruce” (Enarratio in Psalmum XL; PL 36,461).

Auer²¹ brings to attention that the role of Christ as the instituter was also understood by Saint Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan (c.340-397): “Ergo auctor sacramentorum quis est, nisi Dominus Jesus? De caelo ista sacramenta venerunt”: “Who then is the author of the sacraments but the Lord Jesus? From heaven those sacraments came” (De Sacramentis IV.4.13; PL 16,439).²²

Augustine’s and Ambrose’s ideas were maintained by many theologians for many centuries. This fact, however, did not prevent the usage of the word sacrament to name practically all sacred signs, a fact that created difficulties regarding the definition of the exact number of sacraments for a long time. Such a wide connotation of the word began to change only by the twelfth century, a period that “saw a theological movement of unsurpassed accomplishment.”²³

From that time, perhaps the most relevant author is Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141), who, recovering the lessons of Augustine in his Ep. 89.5, presents a

²¹ Auer, A General Doctrine of the Sacraments, 27.


definition of sacrament, adding emphasis on the institution of it: “A sacrament is a
corporeal or material element set before the senses without, representing by similitude
and signifying by institution and containing by sanctification some invisible and spiritual
grace” (De Sacramentis Chr. Fidei I.9.2).24 In spite of his definition, Hugh of St. Victor
still used the word sacrament in a much broader sense, in order to name different rites or
celebrations or things such as holy water.

The restriction on the usage of the word sacrament to the seven currently
recognized by the Catholic Church was brought about by the systematization set forth by
theological treatises of the twelfth century. According to Auer, “the first enumeration of
the sacraments as seven comes from the Sententiae divinitatis (written in 1147), a work of
the school of Gilbert of Poitiers (d. 1154).”25 Besides that, there were many
commentaries associating the seven sacraments with their different saving functions or
with the four cardinal and three theological virtues.

Regarding the Western Church, Auer points out the importance of a summary
III, q. LXV, art. 1). For Aquinas the sacraments were given to man with two main goals:
the first was to give man the best and most perfect means to worship God according to a
Christian life; the second, to work as a treatment against the problems derived from sin.
In order to accomplish such goals, the sacraments had to be seven.


Aquinas argues, furthermore, that, since the life of the spirit expresses much correspondence with the life of the body, as well as the life of the body with the life of the spirit, he considers that man must pursue perfection in his corporeal life in two ways: first, regarding his own person and, second, regarding the community where he lives.

Regarding his own self, man may complete his corporeal life, in two ways: first, in himself (per se); second, accidentally (per accidens), i.e., by overcoming the obstacles to a good life, such as infirmities. Aquinas proceeds, stating that corporeal life is per se made complete in three ways. The first is generation, which brings man to existence. Aquinas points out that at this first stage of life, Baptism is the corresponding phase in spiritual life; it is the sacrament that gives man his spiritual regeneration. The second way to perfect corporeal life is growth, that gives man his due body size and strength. Corresponding to this stage is the sacrament of Confirmation, which allows the Holy Ghost to give man strength. The third way to sustain the body is nourishment, by means of which life and health are preserved. Its corresponding sacrament is the Eucharist, the indispensable flesh and blood for life.

These elements of corporeal and spiritual life would suffice for an impassible life. However, due to the fact that man is subject to both corporal and spiritual diseases, he needs remedies to find the appropriate cure. With reference to spiritual life, one of the remedies is Penance, the sacrament that restores the life of the spirit through the absolution of sins, the infirmity of the spirit. The other is Extreme Unction, that heals all the remainders of sin and makes a person ready for the other life.
With regard to the community where man lives, life is made possible in two ways. First, one authority must be duly constituted in order to perform the public duties and guarantee cohesion. In the spiritual life, the corresponding sacrament that constitutes the legitimate authorities is the sacrament of Holy Orders. The second way to guarantee the continuity of life is procreation, which is spiritually accomplished through the sacrament of Matrimony.

After elaborating these correspondences, Aquinas also affirms that the number of the sacrament could be associated with remedies for the problems caused by sin. Baptism would work as a cure for the lack of spiritual life. Confirmation would be a remedy for the souls of the young. The Eucharist would be a prevention against sin. The sacrament of Penance would act as a solution for moral corruption and sins committed after Baptism. Extreme Unction would work on all the sins not completely removed by Penance, due to the negligence of the sinner or his full ignorance of the sinful character of his actions. The other sacraments would have a social function. The Sacrament of Holy Orders would institute legitimate guidance and thus prevent division in the Christian community, and Matrimony would prevent individual lust and, at the same time, guarantee the continuity of the community with the generation of new members.

Aquinas finally points out that many organize the sacraments in association with the specific types of virtues and sins. According to this association, Baptism would correspond to Faith and should be dispensed as the proper remedy against original sin. Extreme Unction would be associated with Hope and function against venial sin. The
Eucharist to Charity, as a tool against malice. The sacrament of Holy Orders would correlate with Prudence, and would act against ignorance. Penance would be a way to guarantee Justice and to prevent mortal sin. Matrimony would bring Temperance and work against concupiscence. Finally, Confirmation would represent Fortitude, and counter infirmity.26

Some of the above conceptual elements were later incorporated in the Bull of Union with The Armenians (Decree for the Armenians), issued on November 22nd, 1439, during the Council of Florence, which expressly pronounced as follows:

There are seven sacraments of the new Law, namely baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance, extreme unction, orders and matrimony, which differ greatly from the sacraments of the old Law. The latter were not causes of grace, but only prefigured the grace to be given through the passion of Christ; whereas the former, ours, both contain grace and bestow it on those who worthily receive them. The first five of these are directed to the spiritual perfection of each person in himself, the last two to the regulation and increase of the whole church.27

The Bull, furthermore, stated that “all these sacraments are made up of three elements: namely, things as the matter, words as the form, and the person of the minister who confers the sacrament with the intention of doing what the church does. If any of these is lacking, the sacrament is not effected.”28 In spite of the fact that the Bull did not


28 Ibid., 542.
aim at elaborating any precise definition,\textsuperscript{29} it is a most relevant reference for the doctrine on sacraments.

In the sixteenth century the basic conceptual elements and the number of sacraments were challenged by the Reformation. Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, as well as the Anglican Church, presented objections to Catholic sacramental theology. This movement led to the reassertion of Catholic teachings during the Council of Trent, through the Decree Concerning the Sacraments, issued on March 3rd, 1547. Its thirteen canons can be summarized as follows: there are seven sacraments, instituted by Christ, that are different from the ones of the Old Testament; sacraments are necessary for salvation, and faith alone is insufficient to reach it; sacraments were not instituted only to foster faith; they contain grace and confer it \textit{ex opere operato}; not everybody has the same authority to administer a sacrament, and the minister must have the “intention of doing what the Church does” (Canon 11); an authorized minister can validly administer a sacrament, even in mortal sin.\textsuperscript{30}

Based on the above, Auer points out that a sacrament has its structure formed by four elements: (i) an external sign: a sacrament always includes a material event perceptible to human senses, and must be dispensed and received through human action and word; (ii) inward grace and efficacy: the perceptible sign is the authentic demonstration of the dispensation of grace given by an act of God and sanctification of

\textsuperscript{29} Auer, \textit{A General Doctrine of the Sacraments}, 30.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 32-33.
human beings; (iii) it is instituted by Christ; and (iv) must be dispensed by another person in order to be duly received.\textsuperscript{31}

The accumulated contributions formulated by Catholic theologians are currently summarized and taught by the Catholic Church in its \textit{Catechism}, which recognizes its indispensable elements and presents a brief notion of a sacrament in Paragraph 1131, that reads: “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions.”\textsuperscript{32} Finally, the Catechism describes “The Sacramental Economy” as the dispensation “of the fruits of Christ’s Paschal mystery in the celebration of the Church’s ‘sacramental’ liturgy.”\textsuperscript{33}

\section*{II. The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation — Confession}

\subsection*{II.A. The Biblical Foundations and The Institution of the Sacrament by Christ}

The biblical foundations for confession exist in the Old Testament and are the basis for confession in Judaism. A general principle is stated in Proverbs 28.13: “No one who conceals transgressions will prosper, but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.”\textsuperscript{34} In the Book of Numbers, 5.5-7, “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelites: When a man or a woman wrongs another, breaking faith with the

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 13-18.


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 1076.

Lord, that person incurs guilt and shall confess the sin that has been committed.”  

Other references are found in Leviticus 5.5: “When you realize your guilt in any of these, you shall confess the sin that you have committed;”  

and Leviticus 16.21: “Then Aaron shall […] confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins.”  

Other texts like Daniel 9.4-19 and Hosea 6 and 14 describe exhortations for the acknowledgment of sins and reconciliation with God through collective confession. Kidder points out that individual confession becomes prominent during the “postexilic period”  

following litanies present in the Psalms, especially Psalm 40.12: “[…] evils have encompassed me without number; my iniquities have overtaken me, until I cannot see.”  

The New Testament, in its turn, provides the basis for confession and the institution of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation by Christ himself, for instance, in the First Epistle of John, when he affirms that: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us”  

(I John 1.8-10). A call to reconciliation with God is seen, for instance, in Acts 2.38-39, when Peter

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35 Ibid., 195.
36 Ibid., 148.
37 Ibid., 167.
40 Ibid., 2139.
encourages people to “repent, and be baptized […] so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him;”41 and Acts 17.30, when Paul states that God “commands all people everywhere to repent.”42

Finally, the authority given by Christ to the apostles regarding the forgiveness or the retention of sins is based on the Gospels of Matthew and John. In Matthew, Peter is given the authority by Christ who says: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16.19);43 and this endowment is reiterated in Matthew 18.18. In John, equal authority is reaffirmed the same way by Christ to the disciples when he says: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20.23).44

Based on the above and other biblical sources, Penance is considered a sacrament; it is considered the sacrament of reunion, reconciliation of a sinner with God. As Anciaux indicates, it is the “meeting between the prodigal son, seeking forgiveness, and the love of the Father who is calling him.”45 The sacramentality of this reunion is based on the indispensable intervention of the Church, that, through the authority endowed by Christ to the apostles (Matthew 16.19 and 18.18; John 20.23), “confirms, sanctions and hallows

41 Ibid., 1925.
42 Ibid., 1953.
43 Ibid., 1770.
44 Ibid., 1915.
[the] penance™46 and the remission of sins, in order to reconcile man with God. Such endowment is, furthermore, the institution itself of the sacrament. The tradition of the Church has considered Penance and Reconciliation as a second baptism, as a means for salvation and, simultaneously, a sign and a source of grace.

II.B. The Nature of the Sacrament of Penance

As pointed out by Anciaux47 in his work The Sacrament of Penance, a book that provides the basis for this and the following sections, the Council of Trent in 1551 considered the Sacrament of Penance as a judgment or a tribunal, and the minister’s absolution of sins a judicial sentence, indispensable for the remission of serious sins.48 It is understood that a sacrament implies the judgment of the person who seeks forgiveness, a deed that demands the action from a minister duly authorized by the Church. The person who confesses freely submits his sins to the minister, aiming at obtaining their remission. The minister, in his turn, must elaborate his judgment about the sin, repentance and penance, as a work of satisfaction, and, then, proclaim absolution, leading to reconciliation with God.

46 Ibid., 74-75.

47 Paul Anciaux’s The Sacrament of Penance was considered as “highly recommended for all serious scholars in the field of modern religious psychology” by Rev. Vincent V. Herr — see Vincent V. Herr, review of The Sacrament of Penance, by Paul Anciaux, Journal of Religion and Health 3, no. 1 (Oct. 1963): 101-102. Anciaux was also mentioned by Thomas N. Tentler as one of the many important historians who helped revise and correct “the intellectual and institutional history of penance” — see Thomas N. Tentler, Sin and Confession on the Eve of Reformation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), xi.

48 Council of Trent (1551), Session XIV, Teaching concerning the most holy sacraments of penance and last anointing, Chapters 1, 2 and 6, and Canon 9 concerning the most holy sacrament of penance, Norman P. Tanner, ed., Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, vol. 2 (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 703-713.
The way this tribunal is installed and works might be better understood if its comprehension takes into account the way it begins; and such beginning, in its turn, might be better understood with an investigation into the etymological root of the words penance and penitence. These nouns come from *poenitentia*, the word that has been used by the Church to name the sacrament of reconciliation. The original meaning of *poenitentia* is a change deep in the heart and contrition. A similar idea comes from the Greek word *metanoia* found in the New Testament, meaning a “change of mind.” This terminology denoted a deep alteration inside the conscience of the sinner, who moved by the detestation of his faults, submits to the Church and makes his confession. This was the initial interpretation of *poenitentia*, an understanding that changed in the first centuries of Christendom in order to incorporate not only the inward change of the moral sense but also the outward acts related to penitential discipline. It is, therefore, worth noting that the inward act of reforming the conscience (first event) is itself a punishment, since it is inherently and intimately painful and self-humiliating; the outward confession and a work of satisfaction imposed by the Church judgement (following events) then add to the penance, which originates in the conscience of the sinner.

The first move taken by a person, in his conscience, is well put by Saint Ambrose, as mentioned by Aquinas in his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*: “*poenitentia est [...] mala praeterita plangere*”: “penitence is [...] to lament the past.

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faults” (Comm. in IV Sent. D.14.q.1.pr.).\textsuperscript{51} “The sinner’s repentance, his sincere submission to ecclesiastical penance make the personal contribution required from him as an essential element of the sacrament. When a man takes part in the sacrament of penance, it is truly an act of self-condemnation, a painful detachment from sin, a work of expiation in order to be healed.”\textsuperscript{52}

After this first voluntary step by the sinner comes the practice of penance (\textit{actio poenitentiae}), imposed by the Church, consisting of judgment and pardon; then come condemnation and expiation, through a work of satisfaction, in order to reach reconciliation. Anciaux points out as follows:

Reconciliation with God in Christ is the result of the \textit{actio poenitentiae}, of the expiation imposed and hallowed by the Church. In our time, it is confession that forms the chief ‘penance’ imposed by the Church on the sinner. The work of satisfaction indicated by the priest is its complement of expiation, and this often takes the form of what may be truly called an ‘indulgence’. […] Of course, like every sacrament, penance is a source of grace and an act of God’s love. But it is \textit{as penance} that it is a source of grace; it remakes the relationship of love by means of a work of satisfaction, which is redemptive because it is expiation in union with Christ’s Passion\textsuperscript{53} (emphasis in the original).

The work of the tribunal of confession — initiated with voluntary submission to the Church, confession, judgment and the work of satisfaction — is, then, concluded with the remission of the sins. The personal initiative of conversion is settled, sealed and hallowed by the Church.\textsuperscript{54}

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\textsuperscript{52} Anciaux, \textit{The Sacrament of Penance}, 82.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 80.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 83.
II.C. The Structure of the Sacrament of Penance

The structure of the Sacrament of Penance is divided into matter (materia) and form (forma), two elements that must be distinguished in order to understand the sacrament’s essence and how it is performed. As pointed out in the previous section, the reality of Penance requires the joint work of the Church through the minister and the person who confesses, with the aim of both remitting sin and promoting reconciliation. This collaboration involves the actions of the penitent, performed in the presence of the minister who consecrates the confession and promotes absolution and reconciliation. The actions of the penitent create the “substratum, the material principle (sicut materia) of the sacramental reality.”\textsuperscript{55} The role of the minister is to hallow them in Christ’s name, so that his consecration is considered as the formal element (forma) of the Sacrament of Penance.

This is in accordance with the teachings by Thomas Aquinas: “\textit{in hoc sacramento actus poenitentis se habet sicut materia; id autem quod est ex parte sacerdotis, qui operatur ut minister Christi, se habet ut formale et completivum sacramenti}”: “in this sacrament the acts of the penitent are as matter, while the part taken by the priest, who works as Christ’s minister, is the formal and completive element of the sacrament” (\textit{Sum. Theol. III}, q. LXXXIV, art. 7).\textsuperscript{56} His teachings have been adopted by the Church and consolidated in the previously mentioned Decree for the Armenians.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 83.

The identification of matter and form in the Sacrament of Penance is important, for both are indissociable in the reality of the sacrament. Having this in mind, it is worth taking note of a final observation made by Aquinas: “In sacramento autem poenitentiae [...] sunt actus humani pro materia, qui proveniunt ex inspiratione interna. Unde materia non adhibetur a ministro, sed a Deo interius operante, sed complementum sacramenti exhibet minister, dum poenitentem absolvit”: “in the sacrament of Penance [...] human actions take the place of matter, and these actions proceed from internal inspiration, wherefore the matter is not applied by the minister, but by God working inwardly; while the minister furnishes the complement of the sacrament, when he absolves the penitent” (Sum. Theol. III, q. LXXXIV, art. 1, ad. 2).

II.D. Interior Penance

Interior penance deals with the internal process of conversion in the conscience of the penitent, whose first act toward reconciliation is contrition, the virtuous act that consists in the detestation of sin. The Council of Trent adopted the following definition:

Contrition, which holds the first place among the above-mentioned acts of the penitent, is a grief and detestation of mind at the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin in the future. This movement of sorrow has been necessary at all times to obtain the pardon of sins and, in a person who has fallen after baptism, it finally prepares for the forgiveness of sin if it is linked with trust in the divine mercy and the desire to provide all the other requirements for due reception of the sacrament.

57 Ibid.

58 Council of Trent (1551), Session XIV, Chapter 4, Tanner, Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, vol. 2, 705.
Contrition plays an important role in the sacrament of penance, and is indispensable for the justification of the penitent. Without the personal act motivated by contrition, there is no justification. If justification is the acceptance of grace, it cannot exist without a true contrition that prepares and opens the conscience for divine intervention. As Anciaux explains, if “the foundation of sin is an act of the will; it cannot therefore be eliminated without another freely performed act, without the will’s consent and an alteration in its course.”\textsuperscript{59}

Again, the etymology of the word might help to understand it; one of the meanings of \textit{contritio} is destruction, ruin. Contrition, thus, implies the destruction of the sinful mind, in order to allow its reconstruction in God. The destruction is the preparation of the “ground” with a consent for a new edification.

This \textit{contrition} is the indication of \textit{repentance} inside whose center is remorse, a deep sense of guilt and self-condemnation that leads a person to wish he were able to completely erase his past faults. The nucleus of repentance is also where \textit{conversion} comes from, as the exercise of personal freedom to give a new direction to the will. “The sorrow of repentance, the heart-break over sin, are the conditions for a new life. Freedom, become rigid in evil, is liberated, and the hard heart softened. This conversion leads on to expiation which restores and re-establishes order.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{59} Anciaux, \textit{The Sacrament of Penance}, 91.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 97.
II.E. External Penance

It is through external penance that grace is granted and conversion achieved. External penance comprehends the ecclesiastical rite formed by the acts of the *penitent* and the *minister* who works in the name of the Church.

The tradition of the Church has reiterated the necessity of confession by the *penitent*. This was affirmed by the Council of Trent, as a response to the Reformers:

> From the time of the institution of the sacrament of penance already explained, the universal church has always understood that there was also instituted by the Lord the complete confession of sins, and that this is *necessary* by divine law for all who have fallen after baptism. For our lord Jesus Christ, when about to ascend from earth to heaven, left priests as his own vicars, as overseers and judges, to whom all mortal sins into which Christ’s faithful might have fallen were to be referred, so that by the power of the keys they might declare the decision of forgiveness or retention of sins.\(^{61}\) (emphasis added).

This tradition and doctrinal principles have also been incorporated by the legislation of the Church.\(^{62}\) In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council promulgated Constitution 21 *On confession being made, and not revealed by the priest, and on communicating at least at Easter*, which oriented all to make a yearly confession at least.\(^{63}\) The same prescription with regard to grave sins is part of the Code of Canon Law, reformed in 1983, (Canon 989).\(^{64}\) Also, Canon 960 prescribes that “Individual and

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\(^{61}\) Council of Trent (1551), Session XIV, Chapter 5, Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, 706.


\(^{63}\) Fourth Lateran Council (1215), Constitution 21, Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, page 245.

integral confession and absolution constitute the only ordinary means by which a member of the faithful conscious of grave sin is reconciled with God and the Church.\textsuperscript{65}

This tradition and normative statutes are based on the understanding that confession is the curative act that makes contrition and penance concrete by means of an outward act of reconciliation. It is also, as already mentioned, part of the punishment imposed on the penitent, since it is a shame that he must face, and a means for him to exercise the reassertion of his conscience.\textsuperscript{66}

The role of the minister, as seen above, is to act in the name of the Church and as holder of the keys in order to make the confession sacramentally effective, to provide it with its form. The minister must meet two basic requirements: the powers of “order” and of jurisdiction. The first makes reference to his ordination as a priest, that must exist in order to make him a member of the hierarchy of the Church; the second deals with his authority with reference to the places where he would work and persons whom he would attend.

Taking into consideration that the sacrament of penance has the nature of a judgment, the priest must make his evaluation of the true contrition of the penitent before giving penance and granting absolution. Also, as it is a sacrament that requires collaboration, the priest can as much as possible help the penitent in the examination of his conscience. After becoming convinced of the repentance of the penitent, the priest issues absolution, based on the Church's authority.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., Canon 960.

\textsuperscript{66} Anciaux, \textit{The Sacrament of Penance}, 118-124.
The final act that completes external penance is the work of satisfaction imposed by the Church on the penitent. In order to understand the meaning of sacramental satisfaction, we should note that expiation does not necessarily erase all the consequences of a fault; this will happen through works of penitence. In the first centuries of Christianity, reconciliation was to be granted only after the conclusion of the work of satisfaction. Nowadays, however, it is issued immediately after the confession. This, nevertheless, does not exempt the penitent from the obligation to proceed with his conversion and compensation for his faults.

If in the past, the work of satisfaction could include even isolation of the penitent from his community, today the practice of the Church consists in imposing prayers and acts of piety or charity, actions that convert themselves into an opportunity for reflection and full reconstruction of conscience. Even though the external expression of works of satisfaction have changed, their character remains, and it resides in the interior attitude and disposition of the penitent, who, moved by the action of penitence, is led to try to imitate Christ’s passion and assume a life driven by charity.  

III. Brief History of the Sacrament of Penance until Reformation

The conclusion of this chapter includes a brief history of the sacrament of penance. It is based mainly on two books: Making Confession, Hearing Confession - A History of the Cure of Souls by Annemarie S. Kidder, and The Sacrament of Penance by Anciaux.

67 Anciaux, The Sacrament of Penance, 133-140.

68 Annemarie S. Kidder is an ordained Presbyterian minister. She has earned degrees from the Academy of the Arts in Berlin (M.A.), the School of Journalism in Columbia, Missouri (M.A.) and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville (M.Div. and Ph.D).
Paul Anciaux. The aim of this section is to provide only the essential developments of penance, information that will be useful in contextualizing the arguments of the Reformers against the sacramentality of it.

Kidder first brings to attention that, in the early centuries A.D., the practice of Confession had a different form from what we see nowadays. One of the main concerns in Christian communities was whether and how people could be forgiven for their sins committed after baptism. “In general, the early teachers of the church agreed that Christians could receive forgiveness of minor postbaptismal sins.” Interpretations varied, however, on how many times and regarding what sins forgiveness would be granted. Origen (185-253/254) argued that minor sins could be forgiven as many times as their authors became repentant. Major sins, on the contrary, would cause irrevocable excommunication. It is interesting, also, to mention the differences between Hippolytus (c. 170-c. 236), who required strict sanctity from his community, and Callistus (died c. 223), who would accept postbaptismal penance as a form of reconciliation with the church and the community.

With time, people who committed major sins such as idolatry, adultery, murder, and apostasy, were given the chance to make a public confession and then receive public

70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
penance, that could last for years in some cases. Repentance, nonetheless, was allowed only once in a lifetime.\textsuperscript{72}

In the fourth century, after the promulgation of the Edict of Milan in 313, the Peace of Constantine allowed the Church to enjoy liberty and work to establish its institutionalization. This context brought about changes in the practice of penance in many regions. The activity of organization was followed by the adoption of a number of canons, including what came to be known as “canonical penance,” the approved means of penance in this time.\textsuperscript{73}

In the fourth century two tendencies seem to have existed. There remained public “canonical penance” mostly in the West, which was severe and could last for a long time with public satisfaction and segregation from the community into the group of penitents (\textit{ordo poenitentium}). These “rigorist tendencies in the Church [made] official penance […] reserved to a small number of believers,”\textsuperscript{74} and led it to be performed mostly as a preparation for death, since it still should be received only once. In the East, on the other hand, the fathers of the desert gradually adopted during the fourth and fifth centuries the practice of private confession and spiritual guidance. This movement gave preference to private penance in order “to find remedies for the cure of the disciple’s soul rather than conveying judgment and sentencing.”\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 13-14.

\textsuperscript{73} Anciaux, \textit{The Sacrament of Penance}, 47-48.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 55-56.

\textsuperscript{75} Kidder, \textit{Making Confession, Hearing Confession}, 20.
By the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth centuries, the practices of the desert reached Irish monks in their country, where the practice of private confession was incorporated in their monasteries.\textsuperscript{76} Such an incorporation of customs, it is important to note, was certainly not the result of direct contact between Irish monks and Christians from the desert, but rather the consequence of the exchange of goods — and ideas — through the sea routes connecting the Eastern Mediterranean to the northern coast of Europe.\textsuperscript{77} Anciaux highlights the role of Irish monks in Europe, during the seventh century, stating that: “they not only came to preach penance but they brought with them a form of penance better adapted to the real situation of Christendom. It came to be accepted more or less rapidly in the Latin Churches as official penance co-existing with canonical penance.”\textsuperscript{78} He also explains:

The isolation in which the Celtic Churches had existed and the fact that they were directed by monks gives a partial explanation of their special characteristics and practices. As regards penance it is important to note that their official penance had never been so public and so rigid as canonical penance. It contained the same elements, but it was much more simple and private. In particular, it could be received more than once during life: it was the normal remedy in use for the remission of sins after baptism. It included no public status of penance (\textit{ordo poenitentium}) with lasting obligations that effected a real separation from the world. It could be imposed and received by clerics and religious. It was more private and could be received after grave sin without the intervention of the community. A priest was sufficient; the sinner confessed his faults to him and it was the priest who, after the penance was done, granted reconciliation with the Church and with God. In principle this reconciliation was granted only when the penance had been completed. But the custom developed of allowing the penitent to take part in the Eucharist before his work of ‘satisfaction’ was finished. The works of penance were fundamentally the same as those in canonical penance;

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 23.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{78} Anciaux, \textit{The Sacrament of Penance}, 61.
the traditional practices — fasting, almsgiving, prayer, pilgrimages — which the Church took over from the past.\textsuperscript{79}

The adoption of Celtic practices was successful but gradual on the continent, and raised different reactions, from smooth acceptance to violent opposition. Besides that, further difficulties existed due to the lack of doctrinal and disciplinary uniformity in the whole Church, which included, for instance, the hesitation of bishops, “the earlier ministers of confession and penance,” to give priests the authority (power of jurisdiction) of absolving sins.\textsuperscript{80} Consistency was achieved only with the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215; even though, “it was only in the thirteenth century that theologians succeeded in working out a doctrine on the sacrament of penance in which all its aspects found their place.”\textsuperscript{81}

In spite of all good intentions, the exercise of confession and penance since the eleventh century opened space for deviations in sacramental dispensation, not forecasted by its regulation and instructions contained in canons and handbooks. From the earliest practice of penance, the principle was that, in imposing the penance, the priest should take into consideration the circumstances of the penitent, such as age, gender, physical conditions, infirmity, imminent death etc. These mitigating factors could reduce the penance or commute it into a monetary contribution, by means of charity or almsgiving. Some medieval handbooks of penance suggested, for instance, that severely ill penitents,

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 61-62.

\textsuperscript{80} Kidder, \textit{Making Confession, Hearing Confession}, 44.

\textsuperscript{81} Anciaux, \textit{The Sacrament of Penance}, 68.
in some cases, could even find another person to assume the work of satisfaction.\textsuperscript{82} As the practice of private penance increased, the same happened to the practice of commutations, and in this context came the practice of indulgences.

The ecclesiastical use of the word \textit{indulgentia} was derived from its legal origins, meaning the same as a “remission of punishment or of taxes.”\textsuperscript{83} The proper understanding of the practice of indulgence, however, demands more than only the literal interpretation of the term. And since such a comprehension is fundamental for a discussion on the sacrament of confession, we, at this point, make use of a valuable excerpt from Anciaux, who states:

Although the practice of indulgences with their present technical meaning does not go further back than the eleventh century, it is however related to earlier customs connected with the development of canonical penance and expressing the faith of the Christian community in its concern for the repentant sinner. For instance, during the persecutions in the early centuries the intercession of martyrs was considered to be important, in varying degrees. Repentant sinners, particularly those who had lacked courage to remain loyal to the faith, turned to the ‘confessors’, Christians who had been imprisoned and tortured for their fidelity. If we are to understand the reason for this custom we must see it in the context of penitential practice during this period. When a sinner wanted to be reconciled with the Church and be sure of God’s forgiveness, he had to do penance, the \textit{actio poenitentiae} under the guidance and with the help of the Church. The whole Christian community, the laity and the clergy, prayed and did

\textsuperscript{82} The penitential book known as \textit{Excarpus}, or \textit{Pseudo-Cummean}, which was most probably elaborated the eighth century recommended a series of different works as measures of penance: fast, singing of the Psalms and kneeling, almsgiving and restitution to whom had been wronged. The priest should evaluated conditions of the penitent and indicate the job to be done. The book, however, gave a faculty: “those who are feeble in body or in mind we give the advice that if what we have said above seems grievous to them, [each] when his is due to fast on bread and water shall [rather] sing for every day fifty psalms […] And he who does not know the psalms and is not able to fast shall choose a righteous man who will fulfill this in his stead, and he shall redeem this with his own payment or labor; this he shall disburse among the poor at the rate of a denarius for every day.” John McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, \textit{Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal “Libri Poenitentiales” and Selections from Related Documents} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 268-269.

penance for repentant sinners. The liturgical rites devoted to these latter gave visible expression to the communion of saints. At different stages of the time allotted for ecclesiastical penance, the bishop or priest recited special prayers for Church members separated by sin and now returning. Even today the prayers of the Mass during Lent bear witness to this custom. These official prayers of the Church express and ensure the action of the community as a whole with regard to its weak and ailing members. And they manifest the Church’s faith in the power of its intercession (suffragium Ecclesiae) with God through Christ. 84

This feeling of community enhanced the customary practice of allowing an “ail ing” penitent to find another person to undertake the work of satisfaction in his name. A similar “word of caution” against a simple and precipitate condemnation of indulgences is given by Kidder, who reminds us that “the long-standing tradition in medieval society” based on “the religious perspective [that] there existed an understanding of the communion of the saints in heaven and on earth with whom one was invariably connected in spirit and through prayer and with whom one shared both joys and sorrows.” 85 These safeguards, however, do not justify the abuses in the use of the indulgences, especially the commutation of penance for emolument, that became common mostly in the “Germanic nations, where the payment of money in place of punishment in criminal cases was common.” 86

The Church fought against such abuses since the beginning as is demonstrated by the hostility of many Fathers and the actions of Popes. As Kidder points out, The Fourth

84 Anciaux, The Sacrament of Penance, 166-167.

85 Kidder, Making Confession, Hearing Confession, 53.

86 Ibid. Note also that the commutatio and the redemptio, through which “the penance could be redeemed by money to be devoted to almsgiving [formed a] custom probably originated in the Wehrgeld of the German and Celtic peoples. A crime could be ‘redeemed’ by a sum of money proportionate to it. Clearly such a practice opened way to flagrant abuse; rich penitents could redeem their penance without discomfort or even have it performed by their serfs,” in Anciaux, The Sacrament of Penance, 62.
Lateran Council (1215) expressly condemned the extortion of money from penitents by priests by means of the threat of excommunication (Canon 49); it also condemned, among many other illicit actions, the sale of relics (Canon 62) and simony (Canon 63).

These and further efforts, however, were not enough to prevent the Protestant Reformation, a movement that is said to have emerged with Martin Luther (1483-1546), but whose seeds had actually been sown for some centuries before his Ninety-Five Theses.
CHAPTER TWO

THE VALUE OF CONFESSION IN PSYCHOLOGY

C’est sans doute un mal que d’être plein de défauts; mais c’est encore un plus grand mal que d’en être plein et de ne les vouloir pas reconnaître, puisque c’est y ajouter encore celui d’une illusion volontaire.

— Pascal, Pensées, 100. Amour-propre

I. Carl Gustav Jung: confession as a cathartic need

In order to assess the value of confession as a psychological tool we will make use of lessons from Carl Gustav Jung,1 born in Switzerland and known as the founder of “analytical psychology” or the Zurich School,2 as Jung used to distinguish it from the Freudian Viennese School. This attempt to present Jung’s beliefs is very much inspired by, as well as indebted to, the work of Elizabeth Todd, whose article “The Value of Confession and Forgiveness According to Jung”3 provides the route to identify many of Jung’s works and ideas.

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1 Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) was a Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist, son of a Lutheran pastor. Jung is recognized as the founder of analytic psychology. His work has become a reference in psychology and religion.

2 A brief exposition of the core contrasts between the schools is given by Jung, and it is a valuable reference to grasp the main ideas that characterized analytical psychology: “The Viennese School adopts an exclusively sexualistic standpoint while that of the Zurich School is symbolistic. The Viennese School interprets the psychological symbol semiotically, as a sign or token of certain primitive psychosexual processes. Its method is analytical and causal. The Zurich School recognizes the scientific possibility of such a conception but denies its exclusive validity, for it does not interpret the psychological symbol semiotically only but also symbolistically, that is, attributes a positive value to the symbol.” C.G. Jung, “Prefaces to ‘Collected Papers on Analytical Psychology,’” First Edition, The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, trans. R.F.C. Hull, Bollingen Series XX, vol. 4 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 290-291.

The reasons to choose Jung are various. The first is his being a non-Catholic “man of science,” who as such can provide the reader with an unbiased assessment of the evaluation of confession. The second is that, even though he was a man of science, he did recognize the role of religion in mental health and as a source of guidance to consolidate human individuality, especially in the West where, in his opinion, there has been a cleavage between “religious” and “scientific” thinking after the Renaissance. Religion acts as a counterbalance to extreme scientism as well as the attractions and deviations of the material world. The third reason, finally, is expressed in his own words with regard to the method of analytical psychology: “The first beginnings of all analytical treatment of the soul are to be found in its prototype, the confessional.”

The first aspect to be noted in Jung’s ideas about the act of confessing is that it brings about a reduction of internal tensions of an individual. Such relief is caused by the disclosure of an inner psychological discomfort caused by self-reproach. It is the alleviation that comes out with the end of the exhaustion and waste of strength that one spends in self-repression. The extinction of tension also leads to the restoration of communion with other people, who were the object of reproachable acts made by the person who confesses. As Jung states, explaining the mechanism of transference between

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analyst and patient: “everyone likes to unburden himself of his painful secrets.” Jung, furthermore, demonstrates how the act of confessing helps a person to solve his sense of individual alienation from his neighbors and community. Concentrating attention on the patient himself and his sense of isolation he remarks:

Nothing makes people more lonely, and more cut off from the fellowship of others, than the possession of an anxiously hidden and jealously guarded personal secret. Very often it is ‘sinful’ thoughts and deeds that keep them apart and estrange them from one another. Here confession sometimes has a truly redeeming effect. The tremendous feeling of relief which usually follows a confession can be ascribed to the readmission of the lost sheep into the human community. His moral isolation and seclusion, which were so difficult to bear, cease. Herein lies the chief psychological value of confession.

As Todd points out, Jung insists, moreover, that the act of confession must be based on a dialogical relationship, i.e., a conversation is necessary; confessing to another person is an indispensable condition for its effectiveness. If humans are essentially social beings, a true confession requires the involvement of another person to sincerely receive it and, thus, help extinguish isolation:

A general and merely academic ‘insight into one’s mistakes’ is ineffectual, for then the mistakes are not really seen at all, only the idea of them. But they show up acutely when a human relationship brings them to the fore and when they are noticed by the other person as well as by oneself. Then and then only can they really be felt and their true nature recognized. Similarly, confessions made to one’s secret self generally have little or no effect, whereas confessions made to another are much more promising.

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8 Ibid., 192.

9 Todd, “The Value of Confession and Forgiveness According to Jung,” 42.

The person who hears the confession must, however, be duly legitimized in his relationship to the individual who confesses. This requirement is, for instance, fulfilled in the therapist-patient association, where the therapist is put into the legitimate position to receive, to hear all the legal or illegal fantasies and memories of the patient, in a context of unreserved trust and confidentiality. Jung reminds us that this very ability of the analyst to understand and share the feelings of the patient (empathy) constitutes his legitimacy and was what allowed Freud to identify the sources of the effectiveness of psychoanalysis. The importance of empathy between patient and analyst was further proved by the fact that, as therapy is applied, one realizes that many of the thoughts of the patient, engendered by analysis, are linked to or associated with the figure of the therapist. This important relationship was named transference by Freud, and, according to Jung it “is of great biological value to the patient.”

Jung, through an analogy, recognizes a relevant transference relationship between the priest and the believer in confession. The father confessor is a member of the Church duly authorized by its law to hear a confession, within the frame of an absolutely sincere conversation, which allows the penitent complete abandonment and freedom to express his contrition. The minister is also morally legitimate, in view of the expected particular virtues he possesses as a shepherd, and also due to his divinely instituted authority endowed by Christ to forgive the penitent. The act of confession is, furthermore, protected under the most strict rule of secrecy.

11 Jung, The Theory of Psychoanalysis, 190.
We dare say that the minister fulfills all three aspects to establish an effective conversational relationship with the penitent, as listed by Aristotle in his book *Rhetoric*: ethos, pathos and logos. The priest, in our view, has the moral authority (ethos) that is appropriate to the objective of receiving a confession. He demonstrates the same motivation (pathos) — the faith, the conscience of being a sinner with the shared sense of repentance and contrition — as the person who confesses; furthermore, both aim at healing of the penitent’s soul. The priest, finally, bears the knowledge, the reasoning, the arguments (logos) that the penitent is searching for, in order to convert himself; the priest can provide the penitent the appropriate spiritual guidance based on the teaching of faith.

Jung further argues as follows:

Anyone with psychoanalytic experience knows how much the personal significance of the analyst is enhanced when the patient is able to confess his secrets to him. The change this induces in the patient’s behaviour is often amazing. This, too, is an effect probably intended by the Church. The fact that by far the greater part of humanity not only needs guidance, but wishes for nothing better to be guided and held in tutelage, justifies, in a sense, the moral value which the Church sets on confession. The priest, equipped with all the insignia of paternal authority, becomes the responsible leader and shepherd of his flock. He is the father confessor and the members of his parish are his penitent children.\(^\text{12}\)

The effectiveness of confession comes from the natural human need to communicate and share good and bad thoughts and deeds. Such need is satisfied mostly through conversation, which is certainly the most characteristically human activity. This tendency is, however, counterbalanced by another inner human necessity, which is that of having and keeping secrets, good or bad, moral or immoral. Jung states that such

inclination to keep secrets derives from the idea of sin, that, due to its open reproach — based on correct or incorrect interpretations — leads to “psychic concealment” and “repression.” Jung, in principle, recognizes that personal secrets are indeed essential for a human being to develop his individual identity; actually, privacy and intimacy are the true protection of individuality against its dissolution into an “unconscious community life” and the consequent deformation of the soul. But he presents the caveat that the unreflected tendency to keep secrets might act “like a psychic poison that alienates their possessor from the community.”

The poison can be more harmful when the concealment is such that one loses the awareness of it, when one no longer perceives he is keeping a secret or understands why. At this point one does not know what he is repressing anymore, and this unrecognized content “splits off from the conscious mind as an independent complex and leads a sort of separate existence in the unconscious psyche, where it can be neither interfered with nor corrected by the conscious mind. The complex forms, so to speak, a miniature self-contained psyche which, as experience shows, develops a peculiar fantasy-life of its own.”

The same harmful effects derive from the repression of emotions. If, on the one hand, self-restraint has a good disciplinary result, on the other hand, it can also lead to deleterious effects, especially when self-discipline is not connected to any religious motivation or authentic sense of virtue. Repression of emotions also cooperates to

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14 Ibid., 56.
alienate an individual as well as to disturb his mental health, since “there is nothing more unendurable in the long run than a tepid harmony based on the withholding of affects.”

As time passes, a concealed or repressed individual suffers the consequences of his miniature self-contained psyche formed from withheld secrets and emotions, as these undisclosed deeds and feelings may start emerging as different kinds of neuroses (“an inner cleavage — the state of being at war with oneself”), that can be dealt with only in communion with somebody else, primarily through a conversational act of confession.

The value of confession is further understood if we acquire a deeper knowledge of one important category of Jung’s theories: the shadow that forms the unconscious. Jung called it “the repressed tendencies.” They include all those tendencies that an individual represses for a number of reasons, good or bad, fair or unfair, real or imaginary, and in a “half-conscious and half-hearted” manner, based, for instance, on an unreasonable idea of sin or guilt, as above mentioned. Most of the shadow is formed by a combination of primitive inclinations considered incompatible with the ideal qualities of “a civilized or educated or moral being.” It is important to note, though, that not all these repressed tendencies are evil; quite the contrary, many of them can be healthy and good, but they end up being repressed by a person due to his own particular decisions, which might be based on reasonable or unreasonable criteria.

15 Ibid., 58.


18 Ibid., 76.
Each person carries his own shadow, which one forms according to his own personal dispositions and natural possibilities, strengths and weaknesses. Such individual dispositions and possibilities, in their turn, unavoidably vary during a lifetime, so that not only do different people carry different shadows, but also one individual transforms his own shadow along the course of his personal life. One person thus carries one shadow whose contents vary during a lifetime, reflecting different levels of repression or even different levels of good mental health.

The important matter with the shadow is that all unconscious contents affect the conscious abilities, and “if it is repressed and isolated from consciousness, it never gets corrected, and is liable to burst forth suddenly in a moment of unawareness.” So that “if it comes to a neurosis, we invariably have to deal with a considerably intensified shadow. And if such a person wants to be cured it is necessary to find a way in which his conscious personality and his shadow can live together.”

The solution for the problem is not easy. One could definitely repress the shadow, but this for Jung “is as little of a remedy as beheading would be for headache.” Furthermore, the individual would never reach relief from the inner tension and exhaustion caused by the demand of energy spent with repression. The opposite answer, of destroying all sense of morality, would not be acceptable either, for this would suppress the best and most essential quality of human beings that gives sense to their lives. The solution, therefore, is to come to terms with the shadow, with the unconscious, through the knowledge of it. The knowledge of it comes out through no better way than

19 Ibid., 76-77.
confession, which works as “the bridge that spans the gulf between us and our shadow, our secret self.” We might complement these ideas with a comparison between confession and the writing of a journal. Writing our personal history evokes long forgotten memories of our actions, good and bad, and helps us, almost instantaneously, come to terms with our own misbehavior and the misdeeds of others toward us — many of which had generated repressed self-reproaches or condemnation toward others, that were kept secret, but still were latent waiting for the moment to be released and pacified. This is probably part of the process of conciliation with the shadow, with the caveat that it is not a conversational confession, which would actually lead to the full pacification argued by Jung. A conversational confession will — as the writing of the journal — evoke memories that lay hidden in the unconscious and help the individual to recognize and pacify them.

For Jung the process of confession is equivalent to a rediscovery of the ancient method of catharsis (from the Greek *katharsis*: purify, clean, purgate), which consists in eliciting the emergence to the conscious level of the repressed feelings that had not been duly dealt with. Once brought up to the conscious level, these emotions can be confronted by their possessor. This is not a painless process, but it is worth the relief produced. For Jung, “the goal of the cathartic method is full confession — not merely the intellectual recognition of the facts with the head, but their confirmation by the heart and the actual

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20 Todd, “The Value of Confession and Forgiveness According to Jung,” 44.
release of suppressed emotion,”21 a whole process that will lead to astonishing restorative results.22

“This explains the extraordinary significance of genuine, straightforward confession — a truth that was probably known to all the initiation rites and mystery cults of the ancient world. There is a saying from the Greek mysteries: ‘Give up what thou hast, and then thou wilt receive.’”23 We might complement Jung, stating that only when one completely gives up himself — or, in other words, exposes his guilty conscience to destruction (contrition) — he becomes able to reach, know and reconstruct his most human nature.

Knowing the unconscious, i.e., bringing it to the conscious level, is the first part of a curative process. It is actually the first indispensable stage of a healing operation, in which consists a good diagnosis.

In spite of the great value put on confession — and the rediscovery of repressed tendencies — Jung points out that it is not the ultimate goal of real psychology nor of the true cure of the soul. It is only the first, but indispensable action to admit the bad things contained in ourselves and put aside the voluntary illusion of moral perfection, the self-deception that leads to neurotic manifestations. Confession, indeed, is only the first step

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
or stage that must be followed by others, which he, in a provisory attempt to summarize the goals of psychoanalysis, lists as: elucidation, education, and transformation.  

II. Mowrer and the search for human integrity

The second theoretician chosen to help assess the value of confession is Orval Hobart Mowrer, an American psychologist who became dissatisfied with Freudian psychoanalysis, which he considered a very ineffective way to provide lasting healing to people with mental disorders. For Mowrer, the root of mental disorders resides in the anxiety caused by the sense of guilt, which, in its turn, derives from the voluntary — but secret — perpetration of sin and the consequent individual sense of not being able to meet the moral standards valid in his community. Therefore, if the root is the secrecy of an actual sin, the path to the cure demands a necessary first step that consists in the acknowledgment of the sin and its confession. Our attempt to synthesize Mowrer’s theoretical principles about anxiety and the defense of confession are based on the guidance provided by James F. Filella, S.J., and his essay “Confession as a Means of Self-Improvement.”

The first necessary step to understand Mowrer’s point of view is his criticism of the fundamental assumptions of Freud’s theory of neurosis and the role of repression as well as the way Freud’s theory deals with the problem of anxiety. According to Mowrer, 

24 Ibid., 55.

25 Orval Hobart Mowrer (1907-1982) was an American psychologist and professor at the University of Illinois from 1948 to 1975. Mowrer was ranked in 2002 among the 100 most eminent psychologists of the 20th century, in Steven J. Haggbloom and others, “The 100 Most Eminent Psychologists of the 20th Century,” Review of General Psychology 6, no. 2 (2002): 139-152.

Freud elaborated three main hypotheses on the roots and the development of anxiety. The first was based on the process of *symptom formation*; the second, founded on the perception that anxiety derived from *repression*; and the third dealt with the nature of *anxiety* itself.\(^\text{27}\)

In the first stages of his investigations, Freud believed that he had been able to identify a relation between the origin of anxiety and the process of *symptom formation*. He observed that some symptoms were developed by a patient as a way to combat his own anxiety. This would be the case, for instance, of an agoraphobic who would always have an attack of anxiety when walking on the street; the attack would be a protection against his anxiety itself, generated by the fact of the patient’s being in a public and crowded space. Freud’s conclusions about this phenomenon laid the basis for the modern understanding of neurosis, so that an individual is said to have a neurosis when, as noted below:

> [...] he engages in behavior which serves to reduce anxiety directly (symptomatically) but does not alter the realities which produces the anxiety. Freud repeatedly referred to anxiety as a kind of ‘signal,’ a premonition of impending danger, an indicator that something is not going well in the life of the affected individual. The neurotic is thus a person who attempts, knowingly or unknowingly, to neutralize this signal, this indicator, without finding out what it means or taking realistic steps to eliminate the objective danger which it represents.\(^\text{28}\) (emphasis in the original)

In other words, a neurosis consists in any behavior that aims at decreasing anxiety with no deep concern about the latter’s cause.


\(^{28}\) Ibid., 535.
After identifying the neurotic behavior, Freud began a search for its cause, its primary source. In his investigations, he inquired of his own neurotic patients about the cause of their anxiety. Their answers were that they did not know it, and that they were unable to identify it, in spite of their efforts. Based on the universality of the answer and on the assumed honesty of the ones under his treatment, he came to the hypothesis that the root of neurotic anxiety does not reside in the conscious, and that it, in fact, has been displaced from consciousness by a process of repression. Furthermore, he concluded that anxiety differs from ordinary fear, since the latter has an identified object; anxiety, on the contrary, is caused by an unknown object, so that it constitutes an indefinite fear.29

The two first hypotheses above were followed by Freud’s assessments of the idea of anxiety itself. The process of repression, according to him, was connected to the obstruction of sexual impulses or libido. Freud argued that excessive repressed sexual energy, in individuals sexually inhibited, generates a deep inner tension that, when no longer containable, bursts into the conscious level, not as lasciviousness, but in the form of anxiety. Freud further elaborated his argument and stated that any person, especially when a child, is generally punished for his attempts to take part in forbidden deeds, whose nature is usually erotic or bellicose. The reiteration of punishment and imposition of restrictions on his tendencies ignites an inner struggle between the repressed tendency and the terror of being disciplined. At some point, the struggle is resolved by repression, and the forbidden impulse is put under control for some time.30

29 Ibid., 536.
30 Ibid., 536.
The maintenance of repression, however, is too burdensome for an individual, so that the disapproved and unsatisfied desire will lead the individual to reinitiate his inner struggle to the point that the repressed inclination, formerly under control, becomes able to reemerge. The inner resistance of the individual becomes exhausted at some time, and the imminent reemergence of the repressed tendencies leads the person to experience and suffer anxiety. This feeling is an actual fear of the censured impulse, but the individual who experiences it is unable to identify such an impulse, in view of the fact that this tendency had been hidden in the unconscious. Thus, since only the fear is recognizable, but not its object, this specific fear is named anxiety, as per the definition above stated.31

Mowrer agrees with Freud’s arguments about symptom formation. He also agrees with Freud that repression is an indispensable concept to a sound theory of anxiety. He, however, strongly disagrees with Freud on the essence and nature of anxiety itself. According to Mowrer, “Freud's theory holds that anxiety comes from evil wishes, from acts which the individual would commit if he dared. The alternative view here proposed is that anxiety comes, not from acts which the individual would commit but dares not, but from acts which he has committed but wishes that he had not. It is, in other words, a ‘guilt theory’ of anxiety rather than an ‘impulse theory’” (emphasis in the original).32

The change proposed by Mowrer is based not only on his elaborate and sharp reasoning, but also on his own observation of clinical cases. He argues that the problem of neurotics actually resides in their deficient dispositions to grow up in accordance to the

31 Ibid., 537.
32 Ibid.
demands of their own moral consciences. He points out the weakness of Freud’s theory of anxiety, arguing, for instance, that, if Freud were right, and the solution for most cases of neurosis were the complete liberation of all immature libidinous impulses, there would be no reason for the “‘freest’ people, including the frank libertine,” to be among the most anxious.33

Mowrer’s reformulation of anxiety theory raises many issues. One of them, is that “it brings scientific anxiety theory into fundamental agreement with the implicit assumptions of the great religions of the world concerning anxiety, namely, that it is a product, not of too little self-indulgence and satisfaction, but of too much; a product, not of overrestraint and inhibition, but of irresponsibility, guilt, and immaturity.”34

Mowrer’s view of human psychology is strongly dependent on a deep sense of morality (stable relationships, loyalty, sense of duty), so that the cause and primary source of most mental disorders are found in the sense of guilt derived from the perpetration of sins.35 Mowrer, therefore, strongly criticizes those streams of psychology that disregard moral accountability as a key factor for mental health.36

33 Ibid., 550.
34 Ibid., 538.
36 O. Hobart Mowrer, The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1961), 52. Mowrer states: “For several decades we psychologists looked upon the whole matter of sin and moral accountability as a great incubus and acclaimed our liberation from it as epoch-making. But at length we have discovered that to be ‘free’ in this sense, i.e., to have the excuse of being ‘sick’ rather than sinful, is to court the danger of also becoming lost. This danger is, I believe, betokened by the widespread interest in Existentialism which we are presently witnessing. In becoming amoral, ethically neutral, and ‘free,’ we have cut the very roots of our being: lost our deepest sense of self-hood and identity; and, with neurotics themselves, find ourselves asking: Who am I? What is my destiny? What does living (existence) mean?”
Motivated by the above arguments and observations, Mowrer proposed his view that mental health depends on the sense of integrity a human being possesses and the self-judgment he makes based on his own principles, that can lead to the sense of guilt. For him, "‘emotional’ disturbance, discomfort, or ‘dis-ease’ is the lawful, well-earned, and eminently normal result of abnormal (in the sense of socially and morally deviant) behavior […] Once an individual becomes fearful and guilt-ridden because of his misconduct, it is true that he may then develop ‘symptoms’ which reflect his inner malaise and apprehension."37

Mowrer emphasizes the human capacity to choose — the well-known free will — which course of action to take, be it good or bad. When a bad behavior is chosen and an offense or a harm is done, a human being has then the free choice to conceal it or to reveal the fact and, consequently, act as responsible for it. If he opts for the responsibility track — which is the most human route —, he acts in order to recover his integrity; however, if he decides to hide and shun his responsibility, he will bear the burden of guilt with all possible neurotic consequences. And, very important, he will be the only one to be blamed by his suffering.38

It is important to point out that, for Mowrer, the cause of a psychological discomfort is not only the commitment of a fault, but, most importantly, the attempt to


38 Ibid., 245.
deny it and avoid the responsibility for it.\textsuperscript{39} Making use of an expression suggested by Erikson, Mowrer argues that the concealment of misdeeds can lead to an “identity crisis”. When a person refuses to admit his bad actions to others or even to himself, he actually refuses to say who he is — or was at the faulty moment — to the point that the time comes when he no longer knows himself.\textsuperscript{40} The culmination of it is neurotic behavior caused by the unrealistic wish and effort to make a past fault disappear as if it had never happened; it is the “desperate attempt at disowning what actually forms an integral part of a person’s past and, therefore, of his life” (emphasis in the original).\textsuperscript{41}

This idea of integrity in Mowrer’s perspective is also necessarily connected to his view of man as a social being, who needs to be well integrated into the community where he lives, in order to keep his mental health. Such psychological wellness depends on how functional a person is (or how functional a person considers himself) inside the social system in which he lives or, ultimately, decides to live.\textsuperscript{42}

The emphasis on maturity and moral responsibility, social adequacy and guilt for doing harm to others brings about the necessary notion of sin, a concept that Mowrer

\textsuperscript{39} For Mowrer, “historically, the prevailing view, in literature and non-literate societies alike, has been that man sickens in mind, soul, and perhaps even body because of unconfessed and unatoned real guilt — or, quite simply, from what an earlier era knew as a state of ‘disgrace’ or ‘sin.’” Mowrer, \textit{The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion}, 82.

\textsuperscript{40} Mowrer, “Learning Theory and Behavior Therapy,” 246. A great illustration of this process is depicted in the movie \textit{The Machinist} (2004), directed by Brad Anderson and written by Scott Kosar. Christian Bale plays Trevor Reznik, the protagonist, whose mental stability is lost after a car accident in which he hits and runs a child who ends up dying. The burden of guilt leads him to emaciation, insomnia (one whole year without deep sleep), loss of self-identity, and imminent self-destruction. The peace and resting sleep will come only after his confession of the crime.

\textsuperscript{41} Filella, “Confession as a Means of Self-Improvement,” 185.

finds indispensable for psychology. He is very precise and straightforward about the meaning of *sin* he considers appropriate to the treatment of his patients; for him sin ought to be “defined as whatever one does that puts him in danger of going to Hell.” Mowrer challenges most scientistic psychologists and argues that the term *sin* must be used due to its *strength* and indubitable moral signification, applicable to the consideration of human actions. In response to his critics who claim that sin is an unscientific idea, Mowrer recognizes that *sin* has indeed a religious and thus metaphysical ingredient, but, he points out, it has undeniable practical effects, since there is an actual and worldly “Hell-on-this-earth” (the scientific and very palpable Hell of neurosis and mental illness) to which one is led by guilt that is not expiated. Due to such empirical verification, psychology should give due attention to it.

Sin, Mowrer indicates, has direct consequences for the life in community, because committing one sin and then concealing it bring about inner struggle, individual isolation and identity crisis, as above mentioned. The only remedy for such a “dis-ease” is *confession* and a work of restitution, that opens the way for reintegration. Deciding to be honest and thus courageous enough to admit mistakes and sins is the imperative to reach mental health, for nothing provides a more “radical relief” than having no secrets.

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44 Mowrer, *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion*, 47.


Confessing is the way to avoid de neurosis caused by the concealment of sin and the sense of guilt not atoned for.

The act of confession must fulfill some specific requirements to be effective, according to Mowrer. First, it must not be secret, for “all secret confession is a contradiction in terms — secrecy is what makes confession necessary.” Confession must be made to others, but to significant others in the life of an individual, i.e., those who are the relevant partners in one’s family or community life, and with whom one establishes the main interpersonal threads. Another possibility is confession to a group of people, whose discipline and vigilance might encourage mutual moral improvement.

Mowrer, as Jung, argues that confession is only the first step toward integrity. This first step must be followed by an effort of restitution and a process of individual moral improvement and betterment. As an example of a working group that contemplates all these stages he mentions Alcoholics Anonymous, whose heart “is its Twelve-Step Program, of spiritual and moral progress. Here there is much reference to confession and restitution and not one word about ‘forgiveness.’ Here it is assumed that each member is going to have to work out his own salvation ‘with fear and trembling’ and that there is going to be no ‘justification by faith only.’”

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48 Ibid., 114.

49 Ibid., 118.
CHAPTER THREE

THE LUTHERAN VIEW ON CONFESSION

“A Protestant doesn’t confess.”

I. Lutheran Theology of the Sacraments

In Chapter One, we saw that for the Catholic Church sacraments are necessary for salvation, and they contain and confer grace when they are dispensed by the authorized individual; furthermore, sacraments were not instituted only to strengthen faith, which, in its turn, is not enough alone for the forgiveness of sins and salvation.

The Lutheran theology, however, challenges these notions, stating that the sacraments are pledges of the certainty of God’s covenant for the forgiveness of man’s sins. In other words, the goals of the sacraments would be no other than to guarantee to the believer who receives them that his sins are forgiven and that he can, thus, be consoled and pacified.¹ The Lutheran theology of sacraments presented here is mostly based on the work The Theology of Martin Luther, by Paul Althaus² and some of Luther’s own writings; they are fundamental in order to understand the Lutheran view of penance and confession.

¹ John Adam Moehler, Symbolism: or Exposition of the Doctrinal Differences Between Catholics and Protestants, as Evidenced by Their Symbolical Writings, trans. from the German by James Burton Robertson (New York: Edward Dunigan, 1844), 282.

² The German theologian Paul Althaus (1888-1966) was regarded as one of the most important Luther scholars of the twentieth century. His book The Theology of Martin Luther was considered “an all-inclusive interpretation of Luther’s theology,” by Carter Lindberg for being able to provide the reader with a solid view of Luther’s entire thought. Lindberg presents his review of Althaus referential work at Carter Lindberg, review of The Theology of Martin Luther, by Paul Althaus, Interpretation 22, no. 2 (April 1968): 212-214. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCO host, accessed March 6, 2016.
Lutheranism considers a sacrament as formed by the combination of a declaration of promise with a sign, \textit{i.e.}, the divine sign must go with a promise in an inextricable manner. Thus, no sign or symbol alone might be considered a sacrament, no matter how valuable or meaningful it is to make an intangible reality understandable for man. The sign or symbol must be instituted by God and, necessarily, combined with a divine word of promise. For Lutheranism, this reasoning disqualifies, for instance, marriage as a sacrament, since in marriage the sign is said to be missing — or to lack the connection with — the divine promise, so that it does not conform to the requirements of a sacrament.\footnote{3}

Luther also points out the case of a promise without a sign, as is the case of prayer, that constitutes a real deed, to which a divine promise is linked, but that lacks the nature of a sign instituted by God. This would be the case of penance which will be further explored.\footnote{4}

In Lutheranism, the fundamental part of a sacrament is the divine promise, so that no sacrament exists without the word of God that institutes it. Furthermore, the divine word being fundamental, the sacrament has no other effect than the one advanced by the word of promise, which is only the grace of forgiveness of sins and salvation.\footnote{5} One can confirm this understanding in the \textit{Small Catechism} by Luther, in the questions about baptism, where the leader of reformation states that “[baptism] brings forgiveness of sins


\footnote{4} Ibid., 346.

\footnote{5} Ibid.
[... as the words and promise of God declare.” The same can be read in the questions about “the sacrament of the altar,” whose effect is said to be the forgiveness of sins.  

Sacraments also are means to give the believer a guarantee and a seal of the divine promise and, as such, were instituted as instruments to inspire and strengthen faith. Their role is, thus, to solve any doubt concerning salvation in the minds of human beings. These arguments can be confirmed in The Augsburg Confession, an important text of the Lutheran Reformation, issued in 1530. According to Article XIII of The Augsburg Confession, “sacraments were instituted not only to be marks of profession among human beings but much more to be signs and testimonies of God’s will toward us, intended to arouse and strengthen faith in those who use them. Accordingly, sacraments are to be used so that faith, which believes the promises offered and displayed through the sacraments, may increase.”

Lutheranism restricts the number of sacraments to two, namely: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. And, the objectives of the sacraments being to strengthen faith and offer a guarantee of the forgiveness of sins, Lutheranism argues that, even with the acknowledgement of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ, “the forgiveness

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7 Ibid., 362.

of sins remains the real gift of the Lord’s Supper and the body and blood of Christ are still understood as a ‘sure pledge and sign’ of it.”

The physical expression of the sacraments is also important in Lutheranism, since they are physically performed with the involvement of people and their bodies. The sign and the pledge contained in the sacraments are offered to and appropriated by the believer through its physical character. In fact, as Luther explains in *The Large Catechism*, with reference to baptism, “faith must have something to believe — something to which it may cling and upon which it may stand.” Moreover, there must be an external object, “so that it can be perceived and grasped by the senses and thus brought into the heart.” Additionally, the external object affects the human body, *i.e.*, the physical character of the sacrament exerts its effects on the body in such a way that the divine promise proves itself valid also to the body, not only to the soul. Luther, when teaching about the Sacrament of the Altar, in *The Large Catechism*, states that we must regard the sacrament “as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine that aids you and gives life in both soul and body.”

The Lutheran theology understands that the conception of a sacrament as a divine promise and a sign requires an essential connection between the sacrament and the faith.

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9 Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 347.


11 Ibid.

12 Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 347.

13 Luther, “The Large Catechism,” 474.
of the believer. The divine promise not only strengthens, but also demands faith for its effectiveness, so that the promised salvation may not occur if the recipient of the sacrament has no faith in it. This teaching is contrary to the Catholic belief that the effects of a sacrament do not depend on the qualities of the believer and are offered *ex opere operato*. Lutheranism clearly defends the belief that no grace will be received “without a good disposition in those receiving”\(^14\) the sacraments. The idea is that the existence of a promise demands a faithful communication, an honest dialogue, between the one who gives the promise and the one who receives it. The reception of the divine promise, therefore, requires acceptance based on a personal act and demonstration of faith by the person on whom a sacrament is dispensed, after all “a promise is useless unless it is received by faith.”\(^15\)

Regarding the role of faith with reference to the sacraments, Althaus points out that, “in opposition to Roman sacramental doctrine and piety, Luther can even declare that faith can do without the sacraments.”\(^16\) Luther argues that faith is so crucial and indispensable that it can lead the believer to eternal salvation even without the sacrament. His argument is based on Mark 16,16: “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.”\(^17\) Luther understands that,

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\(^{15}\) Ibid.

\(^{16}\) Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 349.

according to this reading, the most important element for salvation is faith, is the need to believe in salvation, so that this belief alone is able to save. A caveat is necessary at this point, because the saving power of faith must not lead to the understanding that a person could simply neglect the sacraments, for they were not instituted by Christ only as a “spectacle;” they must be part of the life of a Christian, who strengthens his faith through their cultivation. Even though he presented this caveat, Luther had to face delicate situations in arguments with the Anabaptists, who, based on their interpretation of Luther’s own arguments, held the view that baptism could be neglected. Luther’s emphasis on the saving possibility of faith also led him to a debate with the Spiritualists who made the dispensation of the sacraments subject to the demonstration of faith by the receiver.  

II. Confession as non sacramental

The above concepts are necessary to understand the Lutheran view on penance and confession, which are for the most part, exposed in Luther’s *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, written in 1520. The work begins its remarks on penance reminding the reader of the bad uses of the rite by Catholic shepherds due to their greed, which Luther had already condemned in his *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517. The object of condemnation in 1517 was the practice of indulgences, whose meaning, origin and abuse were described in Chapter 1 above.

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18 Luther, “The Large Catechism,” 471.

19 Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 351.
Luther mentions Matthew 16.19 and 18.18 and John 20.23 as the register of the word of divine promise that provides the basis for the faith in the forgiveness of sins, but, he points out, no sign goes with it. Furthermore, he observes that what is said in Mathew 16.19 must not be understood as the institution of authorities in Christ’s church, but only ministries, according to I Cor 4.1. He states that no power was conferred by Christ, except for the ministry of those who baptize, so that when one reads Matthew 16.19 and 18.18, one should interpret the passages as a call for the faith of the penitent, who should through faith be certain of his absolution and salvation. Luther insists that the biblical text has no mention to the concession of power of the keys to the pope or to any other priest; on the contrary, what is said in Matthew 18.18 is “said to each and every Christian.”

Luther criticizes the Catholic structure of the sacrament, divided into contrition, confession and satisfaction. Contrition, for him, should not take precedence over faith, as, he argues, is the case in Catholicism. On the contrary, faith both in the divine promise of salvation and the divine threat of damnation should actually be recognized as the source of contrition and humility of heart. For Luther, “a contrite heart is a precious thing, but it is found only where there is an ardent faith in the promises and threats of God.”

Public confession should happen, according to the Lutheran view, based on Matthew 18,15-17, that contains a prescription for a sinner to be brought before the church to deal with his faults, in public. The same prescription, however, does not prove

21 Ibid., 87.
22 Ibid., 84.
to exist in the Bible regarding private confession, so that there is no base for its institution. Notwithstanding, Luther acknowledges its importance and, indeed, defends its practice without restrictions, *i.e.*, not only to a priest but to any other person of common belief. He holds the belief that everyone who confesses privately to another person — priest or lay brother — is duly forgiven, “for Christ has given to every one of his believers the power to absolve even open sins,” since no power of the keys was ever endowed exclusively to priests. According to his interpretation, when one person privately confesses to a brother, the word of comfort and forgiveness he gives is, actually, “spoken by God himself.”

Luther disregards the importance of satisfaction, especially, due to the abuse of indulgences by Catholic clergymen. For him, there is no sense in believing that one can make up for sins against God through works of satisfaction. In reality, God can be satisfied only by the faith of a believer with a contrite heart.

In summary, Luther defends that “there are strictly speaking, but two sacraments in the church of God — baptism and the bread. For only in these two do we find both divinely instituted sign and the promise of forgiveness of sins. The sacrament of penance,

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23 In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther argues: “As to the current practice of private confession, I am heartily in favor of it, even though it cannot be proved from the Scriptures. It is useful, even necessary, and I would not have it abolished. Indeed, I rejoice that it exists in the church of Christ, for it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences.” Ibid., 86.

24 Ibid., 88.

25 Ibid., 86.
which I added to these two, lacks the divinely instituted visible sign, and is, as I have
said, nothing but a way and a return to baptism.”

Luther’s disqualification of penance as a sacrament did not prevent him from
maintaining and encouraging its practice. His view, nevertheless, had severe implications
on the perception of the importance of confession by his own community, who practically
abandoned auricular confession. This, in our opinion, was due to various reasons, but
mostly to one: the emphasis put by Luther on faith and its ability to lead the believer to
justification.

III. Justification by Faith Alone

III.A. A brief notion of Justification by Faith

Luther considered the doctrine of justification by faith the fundamental and most
relevant article of his belief; for him it was the distinguishing characteristic of his religion
from the other ones. In the Smalcald Articles, he firmly states that “nothing in this
article can be conceded or given up, even if heaven and earth or whatever is transitory
passed away. […] On this article stands all that we teach and practice against the pope,
the devil, and the world.”

For Lutheranism, justification, and thus forgiveness of sins and salvation, is
obtained by a person only through faith — sola fide — so that no kind of confession is

26 Ibid., 124.
27 Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, 224.
28 Martin Luther, “The Smalcald Articles,” in The Book of Concord: The Confession of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J Wengert, trans. Charles Arand and others, 2d
ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 301.
necessary. This view led Luther to conclude that justification by faith is the precise faith itself in Christ, regarded as the radical and fundamental search for salvation. Luther refers to Christ’s work and justification as only one thing, so that the doctrine of justification is essentially faith in Christ and cannot be separated from it. Such a faith, however, must be duly understood. Its comprehension, thus, might be better if we could at first mention what it is not or what it excludes. It is definitely not mere “self-trust in matters of salvation.” On the contrary, mentioning Romans 3, 21-23, Luther affirms that “all have sinned,’ and ‘they are now justified without merit by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus… by his blood.”

Regarding what it is, Althaus points out that Luther gives more than one sense to the term justification. The term, at first, can mean the judgment of God through which a man is declared righteous by Him. In other passages, the use of the word makes reference to the whole process a person endures to be made righteous, which includes the divine judgment as well as the making of a righteous person. It is important to note, however, that justification is never fully achieved in this life; on the contrary, the actual and complete righteousness is to be achieved only in eternity, so that such complete justification may be understood as an eschatological quality.

Justification being a process through which God judges, imputes and makes a man righteous — with the caveat that the complete making will be achieved only on the

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29 Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 225.
30 Luther, “The Smalcald Articles,” 301.
Last Day —, Luther shows that justification is first the reception of an alien righteousness by a person, it “is the righteousness of another, instilled from without […] the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith.”\textsuperscript{32} This first reception is God’s granting of value to man in the relationship between them, and it consists in His actual forgiveness of sins. Therefore, the righteousness of the sinner is not produced by himself alone, it is actually given to him by God.

The role of the believer in justification is passive and he can do nothing to actively obtain it. Justification happens, and the sinner receives it.\textsuperscript{33} Luther states that Christ himself becomes the sinner’s righteousness, and when He makes himself one with the sinner His righteousness turns into the sinner’s own. Luther himself argues that “through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has become ours; rather, he himself becomes ours.”\textsuperscript{34} And, since even the most faithful man will ever be a sinner during his life, the process of justification for every believer becomes continuous and takes place everyday through His forgiveness.

The passive role in justification, however, demands an active faith. A man to be justified must accept God’s judgment over him and accept the consequences of living based on nothing more than the righteousness of Christ. Therefore, it does not mean only the conviction that salvation will be granted, but also the appropriation of it. As Althaus points out, “Luther sees the essence of justifying faith in the fact that it grasps Christ. It is

\textsuperscript{32} Martin Luther, \textit{Two Kinds of Righteousness} in \textit{Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings}, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 155.

\textsuperscript{33} Althaus, \textit{The Theology of Martin Luther}, 228-229.

\textsuperscript{34} Luther, \textit{Two Kinds of Righteousness}, 156.
a ‘grasping’ and appropriating faith (*fides apprehensiva*),”35 so much so that according to Luther’s words, “a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: ‘Mine are Christ’s living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did.’”36

For Althaus, it is not correct “to say either that faith receives justification or that man receives justification *in* faith”37 (emphasis in the original). His interpretation of Luther’s theology is that justification is granted *with* faith, i.e., “in the form of faith.” So much so that, if faith is a divine offering, when God gives faith to a man, God justifies him making Christ present in his heart. But, one more important point to note is, as above said, that one person must appropriate such alien righteousness and make it his own. This is done by means of faith, the only way in which a man can receive Christ. Faith is both the channel of communication — the means — through which Christ’s righteousness reaches man and the hand that grasps it. Faith is what makes Christ present in and with a person, in a way that Christ and person are made one, so that a person takes part in Christ’s righteousness in its essence. This means that with regard to justification, Christ cannot be separated from faith; therefore, faith in God’s judgment becomes even more important because Christ is present in and with the sinner.

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36 Luther, *Two Kinds of Righteousness*, 155.

37 Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 231.
III.B. Justification and the reconstruction of the faithful

Luther indicates two kinds of Christian righteousness: the first is alien and is given by Christ; the second is man’s proper and is derived from the first one. This double qualification of righteousness is important to understand how justification can lead man to a new birth from God, in harmony with the divine law and, thus, in effective obedience to it based on free choice.

Luther considers faith the source of righteousness and, thus, the source of a new attitude toward life. Since faith and justification bring Christ into the heart of the believer, God’s own holiness, purity and divinity are given to him; also God’s Holy Spirit is bestowed upon him to such a degree that a new sense of love and obedience is generated in the faithful person, and this person “becomes like God.” This first result of this justification is due to the direct imputation of righteousness by Christ, which “is given to men in baptism and whenever they are truly repentant.”

Faith, which has the ability to make Christ and his power present in the believer, also grants forgiveness of sins and leads to triumph over them, so that it makes a person to become a new one. As Althaus mentions, “justifying faith means being born again from God.” The reborn person permeated by the Holy Spirit will, then, become always ready to serve his neighbor with love and constant praise of God; he will now conduct his

38 Luther, Two Kinds of Righteousness, 155-158.
39 Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, 234.
40 Luther, Two Kinds of Righteousness, 155.
41 Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, 235.
life in goodness. This is the second kind of righteousness indicated by Luther that leads to “a manner of life spent profitably in good works.”

Faith, thus, brings about two consequences to the Christian. First, he is given the forgiveness of sins and is imputed the righteousness of God. Second, the faithful is born again from God and so made righteous as a man in his earthly existence, which means obedience to the divine prescriptions, not as as slave but as a free man who opts for it, and a life of good works. For Luther, these two results are inseparable, so that both effects come together and simultaneously.

As already mentioned, full justification is not achieved in life. It is an endless process that rests on hope, and as such maintains an eschatological dimension. Considering this dimension, in life, a man should keep in mind that he must never rest in view of the forgiveness he receives; on the contrary, he should keep struggling against sin every day. The initial justification and imputation of righteousness constitutes only the beginning. In part, the reborn man is still a “man of flesh” who needs God’s own grace to stand in God’s judgment. Man must insist on the exercise of faith and its strengthening in order to proceed to full righteousness in eternity.

IV. Confession as a Weak Practice in Lutheranism

Luther’s theology on the sacraments seems to have led his own church to neglect the practice of them. The questioning on the validity of the biblical foundations of most of the Catholic sacraments, in our view, led to the decrease of the perception of their

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42 Luther, Two Kinds of Righteousness, 157.

43 Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, 240.
value and, consequently, to the abandonment by many people of their faithful practice in Lutheranism. This effect was still combined with Luther’s emphasis on the power of justification by faith and his own statements that faith alone would suffice for the purpose of salvation of man. In The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, Luther asserts: “Thus Christ says: ‘He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned’ [Mark 16:16]. He shows us in this word that faith is such a necessary part of the sacrament that it can save even without the sacrament.”

The decrease of the importance given by Lutheran Christians to the ministration and reception of the sacrament was perceived by Luther himself, who disturbed by the laxity and laziness of many flocks, urged his community to look at receiving the sacraments, especially the Lord’s Supper. In The Large Catechism dated as of 1529 he writes:

In conclusion, now that we have the right interpretation and teaching concerning the sacrament, there is also great need to admonish and encourage us so that we do not let this great a treasure, which is daily administered and distributed among Christians, pass by to no purpose. What I mean is that those who want to be Christians should prepare themselves to receive this blessed sacrament frequently. For we see that people are becoming lax and lazy about its observance. A great number of people who hear the gospel, now that the pope’s nonsense has been abolished and we are freed from his compulsion and commands, let a year, or two, three, or more years go by without receiving the sacrament, as if they were such strong Christians that they have no need of it. Others let themselves be kept

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44 Luther, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 67. We can find the same affirmation in his Defense and Explanation of All The Articles, from 1521, when Luther makes reference to Rom 1. 17, he states: “He does not say that the righteous shall live by the sacraments, but by his faith, for not the sacraments, but faith in the sacraments, gives life and righteousness.” In this same work, Luther reiterates: “Moreover, St. Paul says (Rom. 10 [:10]) that, ‘A man believes with his heart and so is justified.’ He does not say that it is necessary that he receive the sacraments, for one can become righteous by faith without the bodily reception of the sacraments (so long as one does not despise them).” Martin Luther, Defense and Explanation of All The Articles in Luther's works, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 32 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959), 14-15.
and deterred from it because we have taught that none should go unless they feel a hunger and thirst impelling them to it. Still others pretend that it is a matter of liberty, not of necessity, and that it is enough if they simply believe. Thus the great majority go so far that they become quite barbarous and ultimately despise both the sacrament and God’s Word.45 (emphasis added)

If we take into consideration Luther’s own realization above regarding the sacraments that he considered necessary to strengthen faith and, thus, reach justification, we think we can make a very strong analogy about the consequences of his own doctrine on the practice of confession in his church. If confession were not to be considered a sacrament, and, consequently, not to be considered a valid and necessary instrument to strengthen faith, it could be perfectly dispensed with by believers. Furthermore, its practice could even be abandoned since it was completely exempted from its value as a means to obtain the forgiveness of sins and justification.

A brief listing of Luther’s objections to the practice of private auricular confession helps us understand the low status of confession in the Lutheran church. As mentioned above, Luther argued against the importance given by the Catholic church to contrition, as a factor of merit of the penitent who searches the forgiveness from God; for him, faith alone would suffice. He fiercely condemned confession as a compulsory practice as instructed by the Catholic church, and even argued that people should ignore the need of confession during special occasions. Finally, he insisted that confession was “nothing but a way and a return to baptism.”46

45 Luther, “The Large Catechism,” 470-471.

Luther himself recognized the consequences of his doctrine about confession and justification by faith and even acknowledged that: “unfortunately, people have learned it only too well; they do whatever they please and take advantage of their freedom, acting as if they should or need not go to confession anymore.”

In view of this, Luther attempted to advance some substitutes for sacramental confession. The first was what he called the common confession of Christians, and other named confession of the heart, that consisted in “confessing to God alone or to our neighbor alone, asking for forgiveness.” The second was an adaptation of private confession, where a Christian confesses his sins to a brother and asks for his forgiveness, comfort and advice, while apologizing for the faults he admits.

These two forms of non sacramental confession, however, do not seem to have worked as well as imagined by Luther. The confession to God alone might “degenerate in practice into a means of avoiding the more difficult alternative, of openly confessing concrete sins of thought, word and deed.” Confession to a fellow-layman, in its turn, “does [...] bring the confession of sins into prominence, but leaves the question of absolution largely unanswered,” for if the fellowman — or even a priest — gives advice to or expressly forgives the wrongdoer, it will never equal the express absolution given

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47 Luther, “The Large Catechism,” 476.
49 Luther, “The Large Catechism,” 477.
50 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
by an authorized priest, as in the Catholic sacramental confession; after all, in Lutheranism, neither a layman nor a priest is distinctively authorized to proclaim divine absolution to anybody in a sacramental form.\textsuperscript{53}

To these doctrinal implications the historical context of Reformation must be added. The medieval practice of confession and its abuses of the application of indulgences made this sacrament the core issue and main target of protestantism in the sixteenth century. The majority of religious reformers defended that sacramental confession should be replaced; however, they have never reached a perfect agreement on what institution could do it.\textsuperscript{54}

The sixteenth century Reformation was followed by the seventeenth century Pietism and Enlightenment that cooperated to further obliterate the role of confession in Lutheran church. “Pietism, with its demand for moral seriousness, came to regard the Church’s institution of confession as a hotbed of hypocrisy. Rationalism looked upon this same institution as an illegitimate subjection to an external authority, an attack on man’s ethical autonomy and a violation of man’s freedom of conscience.”\textsuperscript{55} The final result of this centennial process was the practical disappearance of private confession from Lutheranism, notwithstanding Luther’s personal exhortations for its preservation and his own practice of private confession along all his life.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.


The weaknesses of Luther’s theology about penance prove to be in the center of this process of abandonment of private auricular confession. The reformer from Wittenberg was the first to present the arguments that led to the practical elimination of confession, the very same practice whose disuse he lamented. “Thus it is Luther, ironically, who must take primary responsibility for the situation in modern Christianity that allows a theologian to assert, by way of definition, ‘a Protestant doesn’t confess.’”

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56 Tentler, Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation, 351.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE SACRAMENT OF PENCE AS A SYMBOL WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL EFFECTS

When a practising Catholic comes to me, I say, “Did you confess this to your father-confessor?”
[...]
“You go now to your father-confessor and you confess, whether he understands or does not understand. That is of no concern.”

— Carl Gustav Jung, *The Symbolic Life*

I. The abandonment of confession and the loss in mental health — a theoretical assessment

I.A. Jung and the human need for a symbolic life

The Protestant reformation that led to the devaluation and even the complete abandonment of confession in some denominations has been seen as the cause of loss of an important tool for psychological health by many theoreticians. Jung whose opinion about the value of confession was expounded in Chapter Two considered the devaluation of confession after the Reformation a great disadvantage. For him, “Protestant theology, strangely deluded [...] robs itself of the most effective means of combatting man’s insecurity — the confessional, which the Catholic Church has wisely appropriated for the benefit of mankind.”¹

Jung criticizes the destruction of the religious authority of the Church as the representative of God’s salvation caused by the attacks from Protestant Reform based on

the legitimacy of the individual to reach justification by faith alone. Such destruction, he 
points out, has put a huge burden on individuals, a weight that consists in the religious 
responsibility to find by themselves alone answers to questions about the certainty of 
their salvation. After Protestantism, the individual assumed to himself the burden — and 
consequently put himself under the anxiety\(^2\) — of being sure of his own salvation without 
the help of a divinely instituted authority represented by the clergy. Salvation stopped 
being guaranteed by the clergy through sacramental rites, and man was left “to face his 
inner experience without the protection and guidance of dogma and ritual, which are the 
very quintessence of Christian as well as of pagan religious experience.”\(^3\) This situation 
generated the uncertainty brought by the possibility of not being saved, which aggravated 
the individual’s anxiety about his being able to be redeemed from his sins. With reference 
to the tension loaded on individuals, Jung writes:

\(^2\) It is interesting to compare Jung’s concerns about the burden put on the individual of being sure 
of salvation by his own means with the idea of anxiety by Kierkegaard, who writes about this feeling as 
derived from the conscience of sinfulness in contrast with the possibility, but not certainty, of salvation. For 
Kierkegaard: “The consequence of hereditary sin or the presence of hereditary sin in the single individual is 
anxiety, which differs only quantitatively from that of Adam.” He also says: “Anxiety in a later individual 
is more reflective as a consequence of his participation in the history of the race […] because anxiety has 
now entered into the world with a new significance. Sin entered in anxiety, but sin in turn brought anxiety 
along with it. To be sure, the actuality of sin is an actuality that has no endurance. On the one hand, the 
continuity of sin is the possibility that brings anxiety. On the other hand, the possibility of salvation is again 
a nothing, which the individual loves and fears, because this is always possibility’s relation to individuality. 
Only in the moment that salvation is actually posited is this anxiety overcome.” Soren Kierkegaard, The 

\(^3\) Jung, Psychology and Religion, 21. At this point, we can establish an interesting connection with 
Joseph Campbell’s assessment about the human need of rites, in order to go forward in life: “It has always 
been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in 
counteraction to those constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back. In fact, it may well be that the very 
high incidence of neuroticism among ourselves follows from the decline among us of such effective 
spiritual aid. We remain fixated to the unexercised images of our infancy, and hence disinclined to the 
necessary passages of our adulthood.” Joseph Campbell, The Hero With A Thousand Faces, Bollingen 
Series XVII, 3rd ed. (Novato: New World Library, 2008), 7. If the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a rite, it 
gives the ability to humans to get back to the right track, leaving sin and guilt behind and recovering 
integrity in order to proceed with life.
The decline of confession and absolution sharpened the moral conflict of the individual and burdened him with problems which previously the Church had settled for him, since her sacraments, particularly that of the Mass, guaranteed his salvation through the priest’s enactment of the sacred rite, which did the work for him, he had to do without God’s answer to his plans. This dissatisfaction explains the demand for systems that promise an answer — the visible or at least noticeable favour of another (higher, spiritual, or divine) power.4

The loss of much of the religious symbolism in Protestantism, which led to the denial of the sacramental nature of confession, was criticized by Jung as a cause of the elimination of symbolic structure in human life. A brief exposition of his belief can be seen in 1939, when Jung was asked to explain “why the believing Catholic was not subject to neurosis, and what could be done by the Protestant churches to counteract the tendency of their members to neurotic conditions.”5 In is answer he first acknowledged the fact that there were indeed few cases of neurotics in practicing Catholic communities in comparison to Protestant ones, living under the same conditions. Not only did his personal experience as a practitioner confirm this situation but also researches in America demonstrated that one could “find the least of the smallest number of complex manifestations in practicing Catholics, far more in Protestants, and the most in Jews.”6

After this acknowledgement, he proceeds to explain that one of the reasons is confession and the “old tradition in the Catholic Church of the directeur de conscience — a sort of leader of souls,”7 and their training in this activity.

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6 Ibid., 268.

7 Ibid., 269.
Jung gives further reasons, mentioning the “cult itself”⁸ of the mysteries (mysterium tremendum — a mystery that makes one tremble) of the Church, as the Mass, the preparation of baptismal water, and confession as well; all of them, mysteries that function as means of “the expression of a fundamental psychological condition”⁹ and that are real instruments of healing for those who really believe in them. The practicing believer is so much convinced of the values of the ritual and the dogma that these elements have the ability to give full expression to the psychological situation of the believer and, thus, bring him relief.¹⁰

These mysteries (some of them sacraments in the Catholic tradition) constitute symbols that guide the life of those who believe in them; they constitute the elements of a typical symbolic life deemed by Jung as an indispensable human need. The absence of such symbolic life in Protestantism¹¹ and the consequent demise of the sense of a structured earthly existence that symbols make possible are for Jung among the causes of the different levels of psychological health demonstrated in Protestantism in comparison

⁸ Ibid., 269-270.
⁹ Ibid., 270.
¹⁰ When commenting about the curative possibilities of rituals, Jung asserts: “As long as a fellow believes in the Oxford Group movement, he stays there; and as long as a man is in the Catholic Church, he is in the Catholic Church for better or worse and he should be cured by those means. And mind you, I have seen that they can be cured by those means — that is a fact! Absolution, the Holy Communion, can cure them, even in serious cases.” Ibid., 272-273.
¹¹ For Jung, “the splitting up of Protestantism into new denominations — four hundred or more we have — is a sign of life. But, alas! It is not a very nice sign of life, in the sense of a church, because there is no dogma and there is no ritual. There is not the typical symbolic life.” He also asserts that “when you look at the ritual life of the Protestant Church, it is almost nil. Even the Holy Communion has been rationalized. I say that from the Swiss point of view: in the Swiss Zwinglian Church the Holy Communion is not a communion at all; it is a meal of memory. There is no Mass either; there is no confession; there is no ritual, symbolic life.” Ibid., 273.
with Catholicism. The symbolic life, of which the Sacrament of Penance is a part, leads Jung to state:

That is the secret of the Catholic Church: that they still, to a certain extent, can live the meaningful life. For instance, if you can watch daily the sacrifice of the Lord, if you can partake of his substance, then you are filled with the Deity, and you daily repeat the eternal sacrifice of Christ. Of course, what I say is just so many words, but to the man who really lives it, it means the whole world. It means more than the whole world, because it makes sense to him. It expresses the desire of the soul; it expresses the actual facts of our unconscious life.\textsuperscript{12}

It is important at this point to learn the definition of a \textit{symbol} provided by Jung, since such definition is crucial to understand how symbolic references are important for human life. For him, “a symbol always presupposes that the chosen expression is the best possible description or formulation of a relatively unknown fact, which is none the less known to exist or is postulated as existing.”\textsuperscript{13} He proceeds in his efforts to define \textit{symbol} and distinguish it from \textit{semiotic} that deals purely with signs of known and understandable things. We copy down here his valuable and didactic explanation:

The interpretation of the cross as a symbol of divine love is \textit{semiotic}, because “divine love” describes the fact to be expressed better and more aptly than a cross, which can have many other meanings. On the other hand, an interpretation of the cross is \textit{symbolic} when it puts the cross beyond all conceivable explanations, regarding it as expressing an as yet unknown and incomprehensible fact of a mystical or transcendent, i.e., psychological, nature, which simply finds itself most appropriately represented in the cross.\textsuperscript{14} (emphasis in the original)

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., \textit{The Symbolic Life}, 275.


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
The validity and the force of a symbol, which constitute its life, depend among other things “on the attitude of the observing consciousness,”\textsuperscript{15} \textit{i.e.}, on the symbolic attitude of its observer. A symbol must compel the “unconscious participation”\textsuperscript{16} of the observer as well as give him a “life-enhancing effect.”\textsuperscript{17} Jung further asserts:

The living symbol formulates an essential unconscious factor, and the more widespread this factor is, the more general is the effect of the symbol, for it touches a corresponding chord in every psyche. […] Only when the symbol embraces that and expresses it in the highest possible form is it of general efficacy. Herein lies the potency of the living, social symbol and its redeeming power.

One point to notice here is that the remains of confession in Lutheranism lack the symbolic strength of sacramental confession and thus do not seem able to confer the same psychological effects. As indicated above by Hjalmar, Lutheran non sacramental confession does not give proper answers to the question of absolution.\textsuperscript{18} It is not symbolic, since it can be done to anyone or even dismissed out of hand.

In our view, the embodiment of the symbols needed by man is the sacrament: a sign through which grace (“a supernatural gift of God to intellectual creatures — men, angels — for their eternal salvation, whether the latter be furthered and attained through salutary acts or a state of holiness”\textsuperscript{19}) is dispensed in order to give and to guide life in a way unknown to man. This symbolical character of the sacraments was, in our view, well

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 476.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
demonstrated in Chapter 1, with considerations that began with references to the original meanings of the word *sacramentum*, always relative to religious concerns, and ended with the identification of the seven sacraments of the Catholic tradition as *structuring rites* and virtues of human life according to Aquinas’s assessment.

The loss of sacramental guidance has led to the loss in psychological well-being.

**I.B. Mowrer and the problem of guilt**

As seen in Chapter Two, Mowrer considered guilt as fundamental to understand any loss of psychological health. Mowrer strongly criticized Freud’s psychoanalysis and the Freudian idea that guilt “was a false, unrealistic, and crippling guilt which, as a result of a too strict and restricting socialization of the individual, impeded the normal flow of certain instinctual energies, notably those of sex and aggression.” He opposed Freud’s claim that the cure of neurosis should be focused on fostering the free satisfaction of primary body desires even though opposed to moral order, judged as arbitrary. Mowrer defended the reality of guilt, a disturbing feeling that required confession as the first and indispensable step toward healing.

Having said that, Mowrer points out that “prior to the Protestant Reformation, no one (relatively speaking) doubted the reality of guilt.” The valid and unquestioned belief was that, if a person had done any harm — committed a sin —, he should confess, ask for forgiveness and perform his work of satisfaction. Luther’s theology changed this

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20 Mowrer, *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion*, 82.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 105.
belief and, due to the reasons mentioned in Chapter Three, confession and penance were both practically abandoned in Protestantism. Motivated by justification by faith alone, people were to take their cases directly to God, the only one duly authorized to issue forgiveness.

This change in practice, however, had its costs:

This new provision for a short-cut to God and absolution was supposedly a great innovation, liberation, and triumph. But history may yet show that it was instead a grim and costly error. There can surely be no denying that, on the whole, Protestantism has handled the problem of guilt very badly. It has left its followers in a state which perhaps made them “creative” and “ambitious” in a feverish, unhealthy way; but it has also disposed us to the mass neurosis and pervasive anxiety which are so much a part of the modern scene.23

Mowrer seems to endorse an argument similar to Jung’s when he warns against the “absurdity of the Reformation doctrine of human guilt and divine grace,” for it “places man in an intolerable predicament,”24 from which psychoanalysis is not able alone to rescue him.

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23 Ibid., 106-107.

24 Ibid., 175.
As a psychologist, Mowrer finds support to his arguments in favor of confession in two theologians: Paul Tillich and H. Richard Niebuhr. Tillich points out the challenges Protestantism has to face in modern times, especially, the tendency to the disintegration of individuality in the “masses of disintegrated proletarians or even middle-class persons” and the consequent danger of extreme collectivism. For him, Protestantism has opened space for a highly intellectual class of individuals, due to its central principle of justification by faith, according to which no one is allowed to claim a superior authority based on divine endowments. The bad consequence of this loss of authority by the clergy, however, is as follows:

More and more individuals became unable to endure the tremendous responsibility of permanently having to decide in intellectual and moral issues. The weight of this responsibility became so heavy that they could not endure it; and mental diseases have become epidemic in the United States as well as in Europe. In this situation, psychoanalysis has seemed more desirable for educated people than religion, especially Protestant religion. In Catholic countries the situation has been different because the confession has been able to overcome many tendencies toward personal disintegration.

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25 Paul Tillich (1886-1965), born in German. He was a Lutheran cleric and theologian. Tillich left Nazi Germany in 1933 to the United States of America. Tillich is considered one of the most important Protestant theologians of the twentieth century. He taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York, from 1933 to 1955, and became a University Professor of Harvard University in 1955. In 1962, Tillich assumed the position at the University of Chicago, where he worked until his death. In The Protestant Era, Tillich deals with the problems faced by Protestantism in the last century, in face of modernity, the World Wars, Marxism and nationalism. D.M. Baillie, review of The Protestant Era, by Paul Tillich, Theology Today 6, no. 4 (January 1950): 551-552.

26 Helmut Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962), born in the U.S.A., became a Protestant theologian and a leading ethicist of his time. As Tillich, he dealt with the problems Protestantism had to face in the twentieth century. His education included Elmhurst College (1912), Eden Theological Seminary (1915), Washington University (M.A., 1917), and Yale University Divinity School (B.D., 1923; Ph.D., 1924). He was ordained a pastor of the Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1916. As a teacher he worked at Eden Theological Seminary and served as President of Elmhurst College (1924-1927). In 1931, he became a faculty member of Yale Divinity School, where he was named Sterling Professor of Theology and Christian Ethics in 1954.


28 Ibid., 228.
Niebuhr, in his turn, identifies the sense of emptiness in modernity caused by the “trivialization of an existence that might as well not have been” and calls for a “resymbolization of the message and the life of faith in the One God. Our old phrases are worn out; they have become clichés by means of which we can neither grasp nor communicate the reality of our existence before God.” It is our opinion that Niebuhr’s call is very similar to that of Jung’s, especially, regarding the human need of symbols that urge a human’s “unconscious participation” and provide a “life-enhancing effect” as above mentioned. Niebuhr does not mention confession in his article, and we have no basis to infer his position about it, but it seems to allow us at least to see how the lack of sacramentality in Protestantism seems to be a problem even for its main theologians.

Based on these references, Mowrer states his defense of a return to the practice of confession. His defense, however, is not free from a caveat. Mowrer does not take the value of the Catholic sacramental confession for granted. As mentioned in Chapter Two, he criticizes private confession and argues that real confession requires publicity to a group of significant people, the important ones in the life of the confessor.

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30 Ibid., 251.

31 Let us remember again the interesting formulation by Joseph Campbell about the human need of rites (see footnote 3 above).
Mowrer also registers his impression in a list of weaknesses seen in the way confession is practiced by Catholics:

1 - confession has become a perfunctory formality: little time is spent on confession, and that short time limits the possibilities of true spiritual direction during the rite;

2 - the penance assigned is often not psychologically adequate: the works of satisfaction do not seem to “fit the crime” of the sinner-confessor in general, since the penances imposed usually consist only of extra prayers. Their irrelevance may “leave the sinner in a state of unassuaged personal guilt and anguish.”\(^{32}\)

3 - confession is not an adequate deterrent: since “confession is not expected to go beyond the priest and commonly involves a mere token penance can hardly fail to limit its effectiveness both as a means of assuaging guilt and of deterring action when inner controls are weak.”\(^{33}\) That is why it should be made to a group of significant people who will act as a corrective of behavior.

4 - absolution and forgiveness are questionable procedures: when one person commits a sin and does harm to someone else, his good conscience impels him not only to ask for forgiveness, but also to make restitution, which should receive a greater emphasis by the clergy.\(^{34}\)

In view of these deficiencies, Mowrer asserts that “we should re-examine, revive, and revise the institution of confession so as to make it psychologically and ethically more meaningful and adequate. This, it seems, is a challenge that is pertinent not only to the Protestant denominations but to Catholicism as well.”\(^{35}\)

We see here a likely point of convergence between Jung and Mowrer if we remember what Jung said about confession as being only the first step toward healing, a


\(^{33}\) Ibid.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 196.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 197.
process that must be complemented by elucidation, education, and transformation, as mentioned in Chapter 2 — tasks for an authentic directeur de conscience.

II. Alienation and Suicide — a digression into a sociological inference

At this point, we make a short digression from the main theological and psychological aspects of this thesis in order to gain some interesting information provided by sociology, specifically, about the worst consequence of mental illness: suicide.

We begin this temporary deviation with the valuable work by Émile Durkheim36 On Suicide first published in 1897, where the author presents his study of the causes and circumstances of suicide. In Book 2, Chapter 2, Durkheim considers how different religions affect the incidence of suicide. Based on data from different European countries, he reaches the conclusion that self-inflicted death was more incident among Protestant populations than Catholic. Such difference led him to inquire into the possible causes of the phenomenon. His major conclusion was that the greater tendency towards suicide among Protestants derived from the fact that they had a less integrated Church and community, a fact that, in its turn, was due to the prominence given to individuality in Protestantism. A higher sense of individuality among Protestants, originating in the suppression of religious authority and hierarchy, would lead people to freer inquiries of spirit and, as a necessary consequence, to looser threads within their communities. The disaggregation of communities was simultaneous with the frequent schisms inside Protestantism represented by the proliferation of denominations. This whole process of

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36 Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) was a well-known French social scientist considered as the founder of the French school of sociology.
loss of social cohesion and rise of moral individualism would lead people to greater isolation, alienation and despair, all motivations to suicide.

Durkheim disregards the theological differences between Catholicism and Protestantism and attributes the source of greater suicidal tendency among Protestant exclusively to a weaker social cohesion.

So it is not the particular nature of religious beliefs that explains the beneficial influence of religion. If religion does protect man from the desire to kill himself, it is not because it preaches to him respect for his person in itself, but because it is a community. […] Detail of rituals and dogmas is secondary. The essential is that these rituals and dogmas should be of a kind that nourishes a sufficiently intense collective life. It is because the Protestant Church does not have the same degree of consistency as the others that it does not exercise the same moderating influence on suicide.37

The statistics used in Durkheim’s work have been confirmed by other researchers since then. One of them, the French Maurice Halbwachs,38 published his book Les causes du suicide in 1930. Halbwachs recognizes the greater tendency to commit suicide in Protestant communities of continental Europe and attributed the cause to the stronger social conservatism of Catholic groups. He, nevertheless, argued that it was not Catholicism that generated social conservatism and cohesion, but on the contrary, conservatism would favor Catholicism. His idea was that more conservative communities had in earlier times become adept to Catholicism, which later helped them keep as such; or, in other words, conservatism favored Catholicism first. For Halbwachs, furthermore,


38 Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) was a French philosopher and sociologist credited with the concept of collective memory in 1925. Interesting information about his contribution may be found in Nicolas Russell, “Collective Memory before and after Halbwachs,” The French Review 79, no. 4 (March, 2006): 792-804.
rural and traditional circles would favor Catholicism, while more urban societies would be receptive to Protestantism and its emphasis on individualism. He, therefore, also attributed the causes of greater occurrence of suicide among Protestants to other causes than the specific contents of their theology.\(^{39}\)

Halbwachs, however, mentions — without endorsing it, since he thought that both Catholicism and Protestantism provided enough theological arguments against suicide — one argument given by a protestant clergy J.L. Casper who declares that he ought to admit that no true Catholic would like to voluntarily end his life on Earth without the opportunity of receiving the sacrament of penance a very last time. Such desire would function as a dissuasive factor against any inclination to suicide.\(^{40}\)


\(^{40}\) Halbwachs reports: “En résumé il est exact, comme l'avaient remarqué les premiers statisticiens qui ont étudié le suicide, que les protestants se tuent plus que les catholiques. Mais pour-quoi? Est-ce la différence de religion qui explique ce fait? A priori, on aperçoit tout de suite des raisons, tirées de la doctrine et des rites tels qu'ils se présentent dans ces deux confessions, qui conduiraient à attribuer au catholicisme comme tel la situation privilégiée des catholiques, et l'aversion particulière qu'ils ont pour l'homicide de soi- même. Le père Krose a reproduit le passage suivant, extrait d'une étude sur le suicide publiée par un protestant, Osiander, au début du XIX\(^{e}\) siècle:'S'en aller de ce monde muni des saints sacrements, tel est le vœu suprême d'un catholique croyant. Mais comme le suicide doit le priver nécessairement de ce moyen de parvenir à une bienheureuse éternité, il n'y a qu'un catholique non croyant ou égaré qui puisse se tuer volontairement.' Un autre protestant, J. L. Casper, écrivait en 1846: ‘Je dois admettre que le sacrement de la confession et de l'extrême-onction, sans lequel le catholique croyant ne veut pas quitter la terre, est certainement dans beaucoup de cas une arme contre le suicide.’” Halbwachs, *Les Causes du Suicide*, 39-40.
The dissuasive factor mentioned by Casper and transmitted by Halbwachs is recovered in two recent researches: the first by Becker and Woessmann; the second by Torgler and Schaltegger.

Becker and Woessmann assess how the differences between Catholic and Protestant denominations might be possible causes of different tendencies to suicide. In their investigation, they consider many variables, especially community integration, doctrines about God’s grace and the possibility of confessing sins. They apply their analysis to 19th century Prussian communities in a similar effort of Durkheim’s. Their final conclusion is that “both sociological and theological differences between Protestants and Catholics make suicide more likely among the former group.”

Torgler and Schaltegger begin their work with theoretical considerations about earlier studies and comparisons of suicide rates between Catholic and Protestant communities and, after considering arguments by Durkheim, Halbwachs and others, they reach the conclusion that “from a theoretical viewpoint, once important confounding factors are controlled for, it remains generally unclear whether Catholics in a contemporary context still commit suicide less often and whether they still find suicide less acceptable than Protestants.” After that, however, they proceed with two empirical

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43 Becker and Woessmann, “Knocking on Heaven’s Door?,” 24.

44 Torgler and Schaltegger “Suicide and Religion,” 324.
studies. The first considers suicide statistics from Switzerland based on 21 years (1981–2001) of data; the second uses data from 32 European countries, between 1999 and 2001. Their conclusion is clearly summarized in their abstract:

Our empirical analysis reveals that even though theological and social differences between Catholicism and Protestantism have decreased, Catholics are still less likely than Protestants to commit or accept suicide. This difference holds even after we control for such confounding factors as social and religious networks. In addition, although religious networks do mitigate suicides among Protestants, the influence of church attendance is more dominant among Catholics. Our analysis also indicates that alternative concepts such as religious commitment and religiosity strongly reduce suicide acceptance.45

Both studies consider, as said, many variables, but one of them is very interesting and important: it is the impossibility to confess sins. They repeat in a certain way the dissuasive argument mentioned by Halbwachs about the higher price to pay by Catholics in the final judgement due to the impossibility to confess to a priest a mortal sin as suicide, a situation that would prevent the believer from obtaining divine absolution before death. Protestants in general would not have such a tool to use as a personal dissuasion against self-inflicted death.

The dissuasive argument, in spite of having an apparent theoretical validity, is too egotistic and seems in our opinion to invert the cause-consequence relation between suicide and confession. The argument assumes an inherent cowardice of the Catholic who thinks about suicide. The cowardice, in its turn, is twofold dilemma with two equally cowardly possibilities: one is killing oneself and thus ending any need to assume responsibility for one’s life; the other is recoiling from committing suicide in order to

45 Ibid., 316.
preserve the possibility of making a confession based on mere fear of God’s punitive attitude and not on His absolute Love.

Besides the above considerations on the researchers’ assumptions about the inherent cowardice of the Catholic candidate to commit suicide, we must say that their view is that one does not commit suicide because he wants to keep the possibility of confession. Our view, on the contrary, is the act of confession has such salutary effects that it might extinguish the sinner-confessor’s desire to commit suicide. As a matter of fact, confession implies courage; the act of assuming a responsibility for a wrong action. And once this act of courage is made, it strengthens courage itself in the sinner-confessor so that he tends to stop considering suicide as an option to solve his problems. Therefore, in our view, it seems more reasonable to argue that it is because a Catholic confesses that he is led to stop thinking about suicide; a sinner-confessor does not commit suicide because he does confess, not because he wants to preserve the possibility of doing so. The dissuasion against suicide derives from an actual and past confession (an act of courage and responsibility) with its healthy psychological effects, not from the coward fear of losing a possible and future confession that will not exist after suicide. Additionally, we should consider the effects of grace on those who practice the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the possible material effects of it on their lives.

This correct order of cause and effect between the inclination to commit suicide and the performance of a sacramental confession might be considered as the epitome of grace in a mentally ill person, after all his life is saved. Thinking about this effect and
other salutary results of a true and sincere sacramental confession (practiced with its whole symbolic meaning) by a contrite sinner-confessor leads us to our final section.

III. The practice of sacramental confession — an empirical demonstration of psychological effects with social implications

This section is dedicated to a brief exposition of rich empirical studies about the psychological effects of the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. A valuable collection is found in the *Understanding Spiritual Confession: A Review and Theoretical Synthesis*, by Aaron B. Murray-Swank, Kelly M. McConnell and Kenneth I. Pargament, from the Department of Psychology, of Bowling Green State University. Some of the studies mentioned in this article are cited below.

The first experimental study to be referred to was published in 1973. Otterbacher and Munz led a experimentation with 48 college students in a one-day retreat, where their sense of guilt was tested after going through casual conversation or the dispensation of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The results indicated that those students who had gone through sacramental confession presented much lower guilt scores than those who had only casually talked about their faults. For the researchers, “the assumption of guilt reduction in a confessional situation seems defensible” and more studies could be done with this possibility in view.

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48 Ibid., 119.
Another study conducted by Katheryn R. Meek, Jeanne S. Albright and Mark R. McMinn investigated the different ways intrinsically and extrinsically religious people used to deal with the sense of guilt and the necessity to confess. Intrinsically religious people were defined as those who “find their master motive in religion;” extrinsically as those “who appear to evaluate their religious beliefs in light of their other needs — security, social contacts, self-justification, etc.” The findings were that intrinsics reported higher levels of guilt than extrinsics; intrinsics also acknowledged having less satisfaction when committing an offense and a lesser tendency to repeat wrong actions. Intrinsics also revealed a greater inclination to confess the misdeed as well as forgive themselves for it and feel forgiven by God after confession. The researchers found that the feeling of guilt is not essentially destructive, for it can provide an individual with a greater disposition to assume the responsibility for his acts and make attempts to make up for his wrongdoings. They also state:

Despite their heightened guilt-proneness, intrinsically religious individuals have consistently been found to experience greater emotional health than their externally religious counterparts. […] One possible explanation is that stronger internal beliefs in self-forgiveness and forgiveness from God following confession help protect intrinsics from internalizing negative feelings.

The last work that we mention based on Murray-Swank, McConnell and Pargament is “An Empirical Phenomenological Analysis of The Rite of Reconciliation from The Perspective of The Penitent,” a doctoral dissertation submitted by Robert Todd.


50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., 196.
Wise at The Union Institute Graduate School in 1995.\textsuperscript{52} The study constituted an attempt to document an empirical observation of the effects of the Sacrament of Reconciliation on the person who confesses. Eight life long participants in the Sacrament of Reconciliation were interviewed in the study.

The researcher mentions many of the effects reported by the participants. In general, “there was a sense of relief, of healing, of empowerment that an obstacle had been overcome, and a commitment to stay away from the sin which was confessed. \textit{Penitents credited their belief in the sacramental significance of the rite for the forgiveness they received.} Forgiveness was accepted as a gift of Grace”\textsuperscript{53} (emphasis added). It is, at this point, very interesting to establish a connection between the credit given by the penitents to the sacramental significance of the rite. This reveals, in our opinion, their inclination to look at the sacrament as a symbol in their lives, able to satisfy their psychological conditions. Such inclination reminds us of two aspects: the first being the validity of a symbol, which depends “on the attitude of the observing consciousness,” as argued by Jung; the second, the beneficial effects brought about by a symbolic rite also pointed out by Jung.

Wise lists the positive effects of confessional rite:

Penitents experienced relief, release, and resolution to conflicts through the confessional. The relief was distinguished internally as release from guilt and sorrow for past sin. There was a feeling of being justified, even though the penitent had acted in unjust ways. Penitents encountered positive feelings beyond

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\textsuperscript{52} Robert Todd Wise, “An Empirical Phenomenological Analysis of The Rite of Reconciliation from The Perspective of The Penitent” (Ph.D. diss., The Union Institute, 1995).
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\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 282.
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mere relief. They underwent feelings of empowerment, elation, cleanness, renewal, joy, and peace. Some penitents experienced these positive feelings for an extended period following a confession. Penitents described the benefits received in confessional as cathartic and as healing, i.e. healing of a low sense of self worth. Penitents also gained a better understanding of their own sin and a sense of being forgiven for their sin. Penitents had difficulty describing some of the positive effects received due to an involvement with profound levels of depth. Some penitents experienced little or no connection between positive benefits and the actual sin which was confessed. They experienced positive benefits in an unexpected manner. Penitents described the positive benefits they receive as interventions from God. They related positive feelings of forgiveness to their beliefs in Heaven, and they experienced increased closeness and approval from God. Penitents profited from an increased awareness of God and an improvement in their relationship with God, others, and the Church. Penitents also experienced the confessional in ways which facilitated a transitions in their lives.54

We must call the attention to another very important and interesting point in the above excerpt to the “healing of a low sense of self worth” and the consequences of such healing on any tendency to commit suicide.

Participants also reported experiencing confession as an opportunity to receive moral guidance from the priest. The Sacrament of Reconciliation was understood “as a vehicle to receive support to develop morally,”55 in order to promote a change in behavior. This, in our view, might be connected to the arguments of both Jung and Mowrer, who emphasized the need of “elucidation, education, and transformation,” besides the confessional act itself, which they considered only as the first step toward psychological healing and wellness.

One last important feeling described by most of the participants was that they expressed a greater satisfaction with works of satisfaction specifically imposed to make

54 Ibid., 283-284.
55 Ibid., 291.
up for a particular sin. Some also declared that the task of addressing a sin beyond the
surroundings of the church, i.e., in activities of everyday life would bring about a fuller
sense of satisfaction. That reminds us of one of the deficiencies in the practice of
confession indicated by Mowrer, that an inadequate penance might leave the sinner-
confessor with a sense of unassuaged guilt.

These healing effects on individuals might also have further implications, which
could generate beneficial results for the communities where they live. The study
“Catholic guilty? Recall of confession promotes prosocial behavior” published in 2013
registers the research made by Ryan McKay, Jenna Herold and Harvey Whitehouse with
thirty six Catholic individuals, in order to assess their behavior in face of sin and
forgiveness. The study attempted to compare the prosocial behavior of Catholics who
recalled committing a sin and obtaining absolution through sacramental confession with
that of Catholics who recalled committing a sin but not obtaining absolution. The
researchers initiated their investigation by presenting questions to the participants about
their religious beliefs and participation in the church activities in order to collect data
about their tendencies. Then they instructed the participants to recall a sin they had
committed and, later, either recall making the confession of the sin or imagine doing so if
they had not done that in fact. After that, the researchers measured their willingness to

56 Ibid., 213, 227 and 256. Theses pages contain some of the personal responses of the individuals interviewed for the research. There, they declare how a work of satisfaction applied to every day life would bring them a greater sense of satisfaction for their misbehaviors.

57 Ibid., 285 and 310.

make donations to a local Catholic church, an attitude deemed as prosocial behavior by the authors of the experiment.

The authors affirm in their conclusion that “in summary, recalling (or imagining) absolution strongly increased church donations, and this effect was more pronounced the more participants believed in divine judgment and the more they engaged in religious activities such as reading the Bible or praying.”59 They also recognize that the Sacrament of Reconciliation “is an effective means of promoting commitment to the church.”60 They, however, could not identify all “mechanisms behind [the] effects,”61 which should be the object of further investigation.

IV. Summary of the psychological value of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

In sum, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, as a sacrament, does have a symbolic value and serves as a symbol to give structure and coherence to the lives of those who believe in it and thus incorporate it a faithful practice.

As a means for psychological health, it reduces guilt, prevents alienation, reestablishes social connection and gives meaning to life because it helps people to maintain or recuperate their sense of integrity. But it is not only that, the most important value of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the fact that it is a sacrament, an essential tool for the dispensation of Grace for the cure of the soul.

59 Ibid., 205.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 206.
CONCLUSION

La vérité ne sert que ses esclaves.

— Antonin-Dalmace Sertillanges, *La Vie Intellectuelle*

The starting point of this thesis was the belief that the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is a valuable instrument to obtain peace of mind and consolation for those who practice it and believe in its sacramental character. The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, whose most visible expression for the believer is confession, was therefore believed to be a relevant tool for psychological health.

In Chapter One, we explained the sacramental character of confession and tried to give the elements necessary to later understand its role as a symbol, a Jungian concept expounded in Chapter Four. In Chapter Two, based on Jung and Mowrer, we demonstrated the role of the act of confessing in a psychological treatment and the importance of admitting the truth to oneself, assuming responsibility for it and communicating the acknowledgement of one’s own guilt to another legitimate individual, as a way to oppose alienation.

We dedicated Chapter Three to present the Lutheran theology of sacraments and demonstrate how it has been responsible for the destruction of the value of confession in Protestant Christianity. The theology contained in Chapter Three is necessary to understand how the symbolism of confession that had been consolidated through centuries of Catholic tradition was obliterated in Protestantism. This destruction of symbolism is then criticized in Chapter Four, where we also call the attention to the rise
of anxiety in modern man, who has become the lonely individual responsible for “knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3.5) for himself.

We end this thesis with the certainty to have proved the value of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as a powerful instrument to help people to overcome alienation and reach personal integrity and a greater sense of individuality and, at the same time, a deeper sense of life in community with others. We have this certainty for we have been able to provide many precious examples of the beneficial effects derived from the practice of sacramental confession, as empirically demonstrated by the investigations cited in Chapter Four.

We believe, however, that such beneficial results from sacramental confession over the psyche of a person are not due only to psychological clever expedients. Also, the benefits cannot be explained only by means of elaborated scientific theory. They are explained mostly by the symbolic nature of the Sacrament itself, i.e., by the fact that it is a symbol as understood by Jung, a ritual instituted by Christ as a gift to be performed by man as the representation of authentic dispensation of divine grace and the reassurance of life’s meaning.

We state our understanding that science has indeed been demonstrating the value of confession for its results, but such results are not reproducible in a scientific experiment, for they do not depend on science only and its pretense to control all variables involved. The results depend on grace.
Sacramental confession is, furthermore, the demonstration of the human imperative search and love for the Truth and thus need to be truthful to oneself. This search begins within one’s own mind through the examination of conscience and the mysterious burden of guilt felt by all who have sinned. It then goes on with contrition and the confession of one’s mistakes and will certainly continue indefinitely.

We think that at this conclusion we can make use of an argument elaborated by Sertillanges on the first pages of his book *The Intellectual Life*. There he states it is necessary to donate oneself to the truth with an open heart, so that the truth can operate in oneself, for the truth serves nobody but its own slaves. As an analogy, we could say that a man needs to confess with a truly contrite heart, in order to allow the truth to work on him. When he does that, he receives the due gifts of the sacrament in *this* and in the *other* life.

Our final hope is to contribute to the relevant debate revived in the twentieth century about the role of confession and consequently that of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation for the well-being of human psyche. We think, as do many who have inspired us for this thesis, that the scientific study of the Sacrament by psychology and the like sciences will continue to demonstrate the validity of the traditional Catholic teachings about it. This reiteration of evidences is especially important in current times, when the practice of confession in the Catholic Church is in unfortunate decline.
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PL  Patrologia Latina

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