

On Private Confession and Absolution for the Pastor

By Father Mark Braden

Senior Administrative Pastor of Zion Lutheran Church,
Dearborn, MI, an English District Congregation

Every Sunday the faithful Pastor stands before the congregation and speaks words like this: “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” These words bring great comfort and peace to those over whom they are spoken. They bring comfort because the faithful believe that proclamation to be efficacious, not because of the man that speaks the words, but because of the promises of Holy Scripture, the promises of Christ Himself: *“He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”*¹

How much more in the setting of private confession and absolution, where the conditional “Upon this your confession” of public absolution is omitted? As Luther writes of private confession “In confession, as in the Sacrament, you also have the advantage that the Word is applied only to your person. In the sermon it flies out into the congregation, and though it also hits you, you are not so certain about it; but here it can hit no one other than you alone. Would you not be happy at heart if you knew of a place where God Himself would speak to you? If we could hear an agnel speaking, we would surely run to the end of the world... God Himself speaks the absolution, just as He also Himself baptizes the child, and you would say we do not need confession? Although you hear it in the Sacrament, you should not for that reason throw it [private absolution] away, especially since it touches you alone.”²

The comfort one receives from private absolution is rightly a confession as well – a confession that answers “Yes!” to Luther’s question “Do you believe that my forgiveness is God’s forgiveness?”³ It is a comfort received through the Office of the Holy Ministry, the Ministry charged with the duty to forgive and retain sins. And that forgiveness is as certain in heaven as on earth, as certain as if Christ Himself had spoken it, as we confess with our fathers in the faith in Article XXV of the Augsburg Confession: “Confession in the churches is not abolished among us... Our people are taught that they should highly prize the absolution as being the voice of God, and pronounced by God’s command. The power of the Keys is set forth in its beauty, and they are reminded what great consolation it brings to anxious consciences; also, that God requires faith to believe such absolution as a voice sounding from heaven, and that such faith in Christ truly obtains and receives the forgiveness of sins.”⁴

Because he is commanded to do so by Christ, week in and week out, the Pastor speaks those miraculous words over the flock entrusted to him, and over those who come privately to confess

¹ Matthew 16:19, 18:18, John 20:22-23

² *Confession and the Sacrament*, Martin Luther, 1524. AE 76.437

³ SC, Fifth Chief Part

⁴ Augustana XXV.1-4

their sins and receive absolution. He sees their joy at hearing those words, the burden of guilt lifted, and the certainty that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. But what of the one who speaks over others those words "in the stead and by the command" of Christ? Who speaks those words over him? Where does he find the comfort of the forgiveness of his sins by the proclamation of God's called and ordained servant?

The answer, dear Pastor, is the "father confessor", that is the Pastor that hears the confession of another Pastor. That is where the Pastor confesses his sins and receives the absolution that only Christ can give. That is how the Pastor confesses his belief that the absolution the ordained man speaks is as if Christ Himself had spoken it. That is where the Pastor, by confessing his sins and receiving personal absolution, confesses that he believes that it is through the Office of the Holy Ministry that God distributes His Saving Gifts to His Church, including those He has called and ordained as Stewards of His Mysteries, one of which is private absolution.⁵

While it is the joy of, and a blessing to, each Pastor to confess his sins and receive holy absolution from another Pastor, it is also the duty of each Pastor to make himself available to other ordained men as a "father confessor". First, every Pastor is first a Christian, and as a Christian is blessed by God to receive His Saving Gifts. As Luther writes in the Smalcald Articles "Since Absolution or the Power of the Keys is also an aid and consolation against sin and a bad conscience, ordained by Christ Himself in the Gospel, Confession or Absolution ought by no means to be abolished in the Church..."⁶ He who deals with the sins of others as a duty of his Office has even more need than those who confess to him of "aid and consolation against sin and a bad conscience."

Consider too our Lord's Words to Peter, knowing that he would fall and be restored: "When you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren."⁷ There is no better way on this side of heaven to "strengthen your brethren" than to pronounce Christ's forgiveness over them, and to provide Pastoral consolation and Scriptural comfort and counsel to an ordained man who sincerely feels contrition over his sins, and in faith believes that your forgiveness is Christ's forgiveness. As Philip Melanchthon writes in his 1521 *Theological Commonplaces* "Private absolution is as necessary as baptism."⁸ This is as true for the Pastor as for the member of his congregation.

Many faithful Pastors have established relationships with other ordained men who serve as their "father confessor." For those who have not, establishing such a relationship can be intimidating. Select a Pastor you consider to be wise in Christ, a Pastor who regularly hears confessions, one who does not have ecclesiastical authority over you (such as a circuit visitor or Bishop or district president).

Although the Pastor is in a very real way a brother in Christ, consider him a "father" rather than a brother. There is no such thing as a "brother confessor". The Pastor must be able to honestly and fully confess his most scandalous and embarrassing sins, without concern that it will affect

⁵ 1 Corinthians 4:1

⁶ SA III, VIII.1

⁷ Luke 22:32

⁸ *Commonplaces: Loci Communes, 1521.* trans. Christian Preus. 2014, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. 181.

the relationship. Your father confessor is the one to whom you can turn without fear of reprisal or discipline. He is there to bring the comfort of Christ crucified and risen to you, to apply Christ to you, to proclaim the Saving Gospel in all its purity and power to you. He is not supposed to be your fishing buddy or golf partner. He is to hear your confession and pronounce holy absolution according to the Office into which he has been called. He needs to be able to be honest and direct with you as he applies the Scriptures to you – and you should desire nothing else.

How frequently should the Pastor confess? “Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even of those which we do not know, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer. But before the confessor we should confess those sins alone which we know and feel in our hearts.”⁹ It is a good practice to schedule confession regularly – biweekly, monthly, and still to request it when burdened by a particular sin.

Receiving private absolution and Scriptural counsel will sharpen your skills as one to whom others make confession. It also uniquely qualifies you to teach the Fifth Chief Part, for only he who confesses his sins privately and receives private absolution ought to teach others to do so.

These words, dear Pastor, are words for you: “God be merciful to you and strengthen your faith. Do you believe that my forgiveness is God’s forgiveness? Yes, dear sir. As you believe, so let it be done to you. By the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you your sins, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Depart in peace.”¹⁰

A R I T E F O R P R I V A T E C O N F E S S I O N A N D A B S O L U T I O N
adapted from Luther’s Small Catechism (pgs. 221-223) and AE 53.116-121

*You may prepare yourself by meditation on the 10 Commandments,
and by praying Psalms 6, 7, 13, 15, 51, 121, or 130.*

Penitent: (*Kneeling*) Reverend and Dear Sir, I ask you please to hear my confession and to pronounce forgiveness in order to fulfill God’s will.

Confessor: (*Seated*) What sins do you need to confess.

The Confession

Penitent: I, a poor sinner, plead guilty before God of all sins. In particular I confess before you...

Confesses whatever you have done against God’s commandments and your own position.

⁹ SC V.17-18

¹⁰ SC V.27-29.

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If, however, you are not burdened with his sins, do not trouble yourself or search for or invent other sins, and thereby make confession a torture. Instead, mention one or two that you know and let that be enough.

But if you know of no sins at all that you have committed (which hardly seems possible), then mention none in particular, but receive the forgiveness based upon the general confession which you make to God before the Confessor.

The Absolution

Confessor: God be merciful to you and strengthen your faith.

Penitent: Amen.

Confessor: Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?

Penitent: Yes, Father Confessor.

The Confessor stands, places his stole upon the head of the Penitent, and speaks these words:

Confessor: Let it be done for you as you believe. In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins: In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Penitent: Amen.

The Scriptural Comfort

The Confessor will know additional Scripture passages with which to comfort and to strengthen the faith of those who have great burdens of conscience or are sorrowful and distressed.

The Dismissal

Confessor: Go in peace.

Penitent: Amen

*The penitent may remain to say a prayer of thanksgiving.
Psalms 30, 31, 32, 34, 103, or 118 are also appropriate.*

A modern rite for Private Confession and Absolution is found in the *Lutheran Service Book*, pgs. 292-293.

The section on Private Confession and Absolution in Fritz's *Pastoral Theology* (2000, *Concordia Classics*; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 117-122) is also commended to the Pastor who makes or hears private confessions.