

CONFESSION BETWEEN CHRISTIANS

Confessing sins publicly in the Divine Service and privately with the pastor does not exhaust the role of confession in a Christian's life. We also are to confess our sins to one another, whenever we become aware that we have not loved our neighbour as God commands us to and that we have hurt others, particularly in words spoken or omitted, and in actions taken or neglected.

God's great plan to destroy the evil one's power in our lives is to drown it in God's forgiveness. He wants this forgiveness to be on our lips constantly, flowing freely all the time and in all directions. So, if I was preoccupied and so spoke grumpily to my spouse in the morning, God gives me the gift of recollecting myself, turning to her before I head out to work, and saying: "That was uncalled for on my part. I am sorry. I shouldn't have spoken to you in that tone of voice. Will you forgive me?" Then God gives her the gift of saying: "Yes, in God's name, I forgive you. Be at peace."

This constant humbling of ourselves as we stumble along in the Christian life together is the absolute key to genuinely Christian marriages, families, congregations, and friendships. We start all of these relationships knowing that we all are corrupted by original sin and confident that we will let each other down from time to time. But what holds us together as God's people is what never lets us down: forgiveness. Forgiveness asked and then imparted.

This is an area where we truly need a bit of work. We need to lose the noncommittal: "It's okay. Don't worry about it." We need to recover the full-blooded: "I forgive you. I forgive you in the name of Jesus, our great High Priest." None of us on our own has the capacity to forgive to the extent that others whom we love have the capacity to hurt and disappoint us. But in Jesus there is a fountain of forgiveness that is inexhaustible.

Remember how Peter wanted a reasonable limit: "Lord, how often shall I forgive my brother when he keeps sinning against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus blows the numbers away: "I tell you, not up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven," (Matthew 18:21-22).

Peter was astounded, as are we. We don't have this capacity inside ourselves; we'd struggle to scrounge up the willingness to forgive the seven times. But Peter is asking this of the One who is the forgiveness of all of the sins of the whole world. In Him, we have come

to a fountain of forgiveness that we cannot exhaust either for ourselves or for others. As we live in Him and His forgiveness, we set one another free constantly. This private use of the Office of the Keys is one of the great joys of Christian piety. "Be kind to one another and tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you!" (Ephesians 4:32).

We forgive sincerely from our hearts. We are able to do this because we are now living lives of love, imitating our heavenly Father. "We love because He first loved us," (1 John 4:19).