

THE MIND OF ST IGNATIUS ON CONFESSION¹

By ROBERT ALTHANN

IN VIEW OF renewed contemporary reflection on the sacrament of penance, it may be opportune to see something of its place in the thought and ministry of Ignatius and the early Jesuits. For Ignatius confession was an important jesuit ministry. Thus the Constitutions state that 'the aim and end of this Society is . . . to preach, hear confessions and use all the other means it can with the grace of God to help souls'.² At a time when people went to confession once a year, or at most three or four times a year, he wanted the lay students in jesuit schools to go once a month while priests might go every eight days or even more frequently.³ For more detailed advice on the administration of the sacrament of penance he referred confessors to Fr John Polanco's treatise.⁴ However, before considering this work it will be useful to take a brief look at the general practice of confession in the middle of the sixteenth century.

The *Chronicon* of Polanco gives some startling examples of the prevailing state of ignorance in regard to this sacrament. From Sicily it was reported that there was a man over thirty-three years of age who had never been to confession at all (II, 226). In Bologna priests were apparently ignorant of the formula of absolution, and one priest had had a care of souls for forty years without ever learning it (V, 124). Some thought that they had not been absolved unless they paid the confessor. In consequence it is not surprising that some went to confession rather seldom (VI, 165). In Germany it was customary to make a confession in quite general terms, i.e. without specifying the sins, and priests scarcely ever asked questions (V, 231). From Vienna it was reported that only men confessed (VI, 339).

To remedy such ignorance it was necessary to instruct not only penitents but also confessors, and already in the late middle ages manuals on confession had begun to appear, becoming widespread with the introduction of printing.⁵ They offer advice for the responsible administration and worthy

¹ This paper is indebted to Fr E. Malatesta of the Gregorian University who offered valuable suggestions, and especially to Fr M. Ledrus who gave the initial inspiration and other help.

² *Constitutions* 308; see too 528 and 642.

³ For students of the *Chronicon* of Polanco II, p 479 and *passim*. Ignatius took a close interest in this, once even asking the rector of the Collegio Tyburtino to let him know how many confessions he heard each week, 'and so he made the good father more careful about this pious ministry' (*Chronicon* II, p 517). For priests of the *Directorium* of the Exercises no 68.

⁴ P. Joanne Polanco S.J. *Breve Directorium ad Confessarii confitentis Munus recte obeundum* (Genuae, 1844), first published in Rome in 1554.

⁵ Cf Padberg, R. in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* II, p 126, s.v. 'Beichtbüchlein' (Herder — Freiburg, ²1958).

reception of the sacrament of penance and contain an extensive casuistry. The tridentine reform movement also created a significant literature for teaching confession. Since confession was a rare event it was supposed to be extremely thorough and it was to help penitents and confessors in this difficult task of making an annual or 'general' confession that these manuals were composed. Their content was basically a catalogue of sins that can be committed. In addition, depending on whether the work was intended primarily for confessors or penitents, there follows matter along lines recommended by Ignatius too:⁶ restitution, reserved cases and censures, extraordinary forms of absolution, a short interrogation about sins and their remedies, and how to avoid harm to oneself and help one's neighbour.⁷

An example of such a manual is that of St Antoninus, Archbishop of Florence.⁸ It was perhaps the most popular work of its kind, still being reprinted fifty years after his death in 1459.⁹ Like almost all these manuals, his prescribed that the people be asked in detail about the faith, the Our Father, the ten Commandments of God and the precepts of the Church. He gives advice on questioning children about their relations with their parents and about how to question parents in regard to their children and their servants. These books also contained special questions for different ranks and classes of people. St Antoninus had questions for judges, for advocates (whether they have defended an unrighteous cause or failed to protect the poor); for teachers, for physicians (whether they have attended the poor); for merchants, innkeepers, butchers (whether they have sold bad meat or given light weight); for bakers, for tailors (whether they have kept back remnants of cloth or worked unnecessarily on sundays); for smiths, weavers, goldsmiths, servants and day-labourers.¹⁰

In view of the numerous manuals on confession in circulation, it might seem strange that Ignatius should commission yet another. One reason is that he desired uniformity among his priests in this matter as Polanco points out in the preface to his *Directorium*. However, he adds that the compendium was to be composed 'partly from reading, partly from observation and also in the light of numerous experiments carried out by myself and others' (p 3). In other words there existed no entirely satisfactory manual. This lack is also implied by the fact that the Pope's Roman Vicar encouraged its diffusion beyond the limits of the Society (p 4). The fact that it underwent nearly forty editions, not counting translations, shows that it filled a need.¹¹

⁶ *Constitutions* 407.

⁷ Calveras, J.: 'Los "Confesionales" y los Ejercicios de San Ignacio' (*Archivum Historicum S.I.* 17 [1948] 51-101), p 52.

⁸ *Confessionale D. Antonini archiepiscopi Florentini*, 1508.

⁹ Cf Von Pastor, L.: *The History of the Popes*, V (London, 1898), p 34.

¹⁰ St Antoninus, *op. cit.*, f 74b seq., et 43.

¹¹ Sommervogel, C., S.J.: *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jesus* (Bruxelles, Schepens, 1890-1909) 10 vols, VI, 939-43.

The contents of Polanco's *Directorium* may be briefly described as follows. First, he treats of the importance of the sacrament of penance whose end is reconciliation, amendment of life, spiritual consolation and a readiness to receive further grace. Next, he lists the qualities necessary for a confessor: knowledge, authority, moral goodness, prudence, especially with women, and the ability to keep the seal of confession. The confessor is advised not to look at his penitent, even, if nothing else is available, shading his eyes with his hand (p 14). Then he treats of the way in which the confessor should deal with his penitent, how he should question, reprehend and encourage him. For instance 'towards those who confess frequently the confessors should be severe rather than kindly, and they should not preach long sermons' (p 15). With regard to the penance to be imposed, the *Directorium* offers advice which can supplement that of the new rite of penance. The latter requires the satisfaction to fit the crime as far as possible (no 18). Polanco recommends that the penance should be smaller rather than greater, and should fit the person even more than the quality or quantity of the crime. Thus on one ready to do greater penance, the greater penance may be imposed, while for the weak a lesser penance suffices, provided that the penitent is likely to carry it out. It is better to order one *Pater* and *Ave* than to crush the penitent beneath a heavy burden. However, the weak too should be told they deserve a heavier penance, unless telling them this would cause too much dejection (p 30).

The confessor is also given detailed instruction on how to help the penitent improve his life. Polanco recommends especially offering oneself to God in the morning, daily examination of conscience and frequent confession (pp 36-37). Although he does not mention frequent communion at this point, it does feature immediately after frequent confession in the section *Remedia Universalia* (pp 85-86). Next, Polanco deals with the absolution and he begins with the formula, pointing out what is essential and what is not. As was customary in these manuals there is a section of questioning based on the decalogue, the precepts of the Church and the deadly sins. This is then put into the form of a song or mnemonic.

The *Directorium* recognizes the importance of the social-ecclesial role of confession, emphasized by the new rite of penance.¹² Thus many of the questions for a wide variety of people in different walks of life concern their dealings with others. In fact the categories used already imply a community dimension:¹³ temporal lords, bishops, judges, advocates, married people, priests and other clerics, religious, teachers, students, merchants, physicians and children. The social dimension of satisfaction for sin, stressed in the new rite of penance by the recommendation of works of mercy (no 18) also appears in the *Directorium* where almsgiving is proposed not only as a specific

¹² See e.g., the revision of the absolution formula and the special commendation of works of mercy as forms of satisfaction for sin (nos 18, 19 and also 5).

¹³ This dimension is invariably found in the manuals on confession, see above.

remedy for avarice (p 31), but also as an example of the kind of work that will help the penitent not to fall back into the same sins (pp 31-32). This section is followed by advice on remedies for sins. Finally there is a fairly long section on restitution.

Between the manuals of Antoninus and Polanco certain differences can be observed. Thus Polanco's work no longer asks questions on the Creed or the Our Father, nor are his questions so detailed. The list of different occupations shows a greater interest in the confessions of clerics and religious, but Polanco's list of lay occupations and conditions of life, though less detailed than that of Antoninus is comprehensive. In general one can say that the latter work is a good example of the older type of manual: comprehensive and detailed. Later there came a certain simplification in the questions of the confessor, reducing them to the Commandments and mortal sins.¹⁴ Polanco's *Directorium* is an example of this simplification. It may well be that it is actually a summary of that of Antoninus, for all the points that appear in summary form in Polanco are treated at length by Antoninus.¹⁵ One may also note Polanco's letter to Laynez of 6 July 1549 which states that the *Practica del confessar* is to be made clearer and shorter.¹⁶

In fact we know very little about the genesis of Polanco's treatise. Since it only appeared in 1554 we may suppose that it was being revised during the years that followed Polanco's letter to Laynez mentioned above. With regard to its authorship, Polanco in a letter of 13 January 1554 writes that 'if something good is found in it, that should more quickly be thought to come from others than from me.'¹⁷ He writes that Fr Olave only gave it his name because it could not be published anonymously. It is clear that others collaborated in the work, however, it is likely that his name rather than another's was given to it because of the essential part that he played in its composition.¹⁸ Ignatius recommended this work to his retreatants.¹⁹

The stress on detail on Polanco's *Directorium* was due partly to the rarity of confession, partly to the pervasive influence of the *Devotio Moderna* which emphasized the human element.²⁰ One should also remember that a long and detailed examination of conscience was part of the process of awakening sorrow for sin common at the time. Thus it was not unusual for the general or annual confession to last three days, and two of these were for examination and awakening contrition. Ignatius's three days for confession at Montserrat was according to the custom of the age.²¹ The communal

¹⁴ Calveras, *art. cit.* p 59.

¹⁵ Calveras, *art. cit.* p 57.

¹⁶ Monumenta Ignatiana 1^a Ser. II, pp 467-68 (Madrid, 1904).

¹⁷ Monumenta Ignatiana 1^a Ser. VI, p 167.

¹⁸ Gilmont, Jean-Francois: *Les Ecrits spirituels des Premiers Jésuites* (Roma — Institutum Historicum S.I., 1961), p 204.

¹⁹ According to P. Victoria (Monumenta Ignatiana 2^a Ser. Exercitia Spiritualia, p 794).

²⁰ Padberg, *loc. cit.*

²¹ Calveras, *art. cit.* pp 59, 61.

penitential services recommended today, different as they are, also aim to awaken an awareness of sin and to prepare for a real conversion of the heart,²² which was the aim of St Ignatius, an aim which Polanco's *Directorium* was expressly designed to further.

²² *Rite of Penance* no 37 (London, 1977).

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