

INSUPERABLE EMBARRASSMENT AND CONFESSION

HILARY R. WERTS, S.J.

Alma College

MAY a penitent use perfect contrition instead of the sacrament of penance before Holy Communion, when unusual embarrassment makes confession of a shameful sin very difficult? Many authors say that in certain circumstances he may do so, and this suggests the further question: May he go to confession but omit the accusation of his shameful sin? To answer this it will be helpful to review briefly the history of the question of extraordinary embarrassment in reference to confession.

EMBARRASSMENT AND THE LAW OF CANONS 807 AND 856

The Council of Trent teaches that the commandment of St. Paul, "Let a man prove himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of the cup" (I Cor. 11:28), is to be understood, according to the practice of the Church, to require sacramental confession before one who is conscious of mortal sin may receive the Holy Eucharist.¹ Whether this obligation of sacramental confession rather than perfect contrition is a divine or an ecclesiastical law is not clear. Noldin and Merkelbach hold that it is ecclesiastical; St. Alphonsus insists that it is a divine law, and Cappello and Aertnys-Damen favor this latter opinion.² This law has always been considered to admit some exceptions arising from such difficulties as the danger of grave scandal, or of infamy in the sight of persons other than the confessor. The question of extraordinary embarrassment as an excusing cause is rather recent and stems from opinions in which different but somewhat similar cases are discussed.

Perhaps the first case in the evolution of this discussion was that of a religious who is ashamed to confess his sin lest it reflect upon the good name of his order. Authors did not consider such embarrassment

¹ Session XIII, c. 7.

² Noldin, *Summa Theologiae Moralis* (ed. 15a-16a; Oeniponte: Rausch, 1939), III, n. 141; Merkelbach, *Summa Theologiae Moralis* (ed. 3a; Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, s.a.), III, n. 271; S. Alphonsus de Liguori, *Theologia Moralis* (ed. Gaudé; Romae: Typographia Vaticana, 1905-12), lib. VI, n. 256; Aertnys-Damen, *Theologia Moralis* (ed. 13a; Taurini-Romae: Marietti, 1939), II, n. 143; Cappello, *Tractatus Canonico-Moralis de Sacramentis* (ed. 3a; Taurinorum Augustae: Marietti, 1938), I, n. 488.

sufficient to excuse the religious from the obligation of confession.³ In the course of time other cases were proposed, which more closely approach the one under discussion. A brief summary of their treatment by different authors will help in the solution of the present case.

Gousset taught that one is not obliged to confess before Communion when the only available confessor is one towards whom the penitent feels an insurmountable repugnance because he regards him, rightly or wrongly, as indiscreet in the matter of the sacramental seal.⁴

Kenrick held that there is no *copia confessarii* if there is no confessor except the bishop, who does not wish to hear the confession of his priest; for the judge in the external forum should not know the state of the accused from his own sacramental confession.⁵ He also taught that if one has inculpably omitted mention of a grave sin in a general confession, this sin, already indirectly remitted, need not be mentioned to a confessor to whom the penitent could confess it only with very grave embarrassment, if there would soon be an opportunity to confess again to the confessor who heard the general confession.⁶

Berardi, extending these opinions, says that a confessor is lacking in the sense of the law requiring confession before Mass or Communion, if there is only one available confessor and invincible repugnance prevents confession to him, e.g., an uncle who would have to confess a disgraceful sin to his nephew.⁷ He considers this to be an application of the legal principle, "When the law cannot be observed in the way in which it is commonly observed, the obligation ceases." He also invokes the authority of Gousset whose opinion has been seen, but he does not mention that author's limiting clause, that the repugnance arises from suspicion about the confessor's discretion in regard to the seal of confession.

Lehmkuhl does not venture to deny that extraordinary reasons against confessing to a certain confessor may excuse from this law.⁸

³ Cf. Salmanticenses, *Cursus Theologiae Moralis* (Venetiis: 1734), Tom. I, tr. 4, cap. 7, n. 43.

⁴ Gousset, *Théologie morale* (Bruxelles: Vanderborgh, 1844-45), II, n. 193.

⁵ Kenrick, *Theologia Moralis* (Mechliniae: 1861), II, tr. 17, n. 45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, tr. 18, n. 57.

⁷ Berardi, *Praxis Confessariorum* (Faventiae: 1884), n. 654, III.

⁸ Lehmkuhl, *Casus Conscientiae* (Friburgi Brisgoviae: Herder, 1902), II, n. 157.

Genicot gives the example of a pastor's invincible repugnance to confessing to his youthful curate, because of the danger of grave difficulties in their future relations. He considers this a sufficient cause to excuse the pastor from the law of canon 807, prescribing confession before celebrating Mass.⁹ He says the difficulty is not intrinsic to confession, and even if it were, authors excuse from this law for lesser reasons, hence there would be place for *epikeia*.¹⁰

Noldin says that the opinion is not improbable but is not to be so extended that the mere relation of pastor to curate is considered in itself as sufficient excuse. The added element of extraordinary embarrassment must be present.¹¹ The probability of this opinion is admitted by Aertnys-Damen, Arregui, Cappello, Davis, Piscetta-Gennaro, Ubach, and Vermeersch.¹²

However, these authors wisely add cautions for the use of the opinion. Thus Ubach says that it may lead to abuse if through self-deception the application is extended beyond the bounds set by the authors. Vermeersch restricts its use to cases in which the extraordinary embarrassment causes an almost insuperable repugnance when the penitent has access to only one or, at the most, two confessors who are intimates. If there is a choice among a greater number of confessors the application of this opinion cannot be approved; but after the fact one may leave the matter to the conscience of the penitent if he is one who would be easily discouraged. If the penitent falls frequently and celebrates Mass frequently without previous confession, he is not to be permitted to use this opinion. Rather he should be encouraged to select a confessor among those available and open his conscience trustfully to him. He will find his confidence received with a kindness that will

⁹ Genicot, *Casus Conscientiae* (ed. 6a; Louvain: Museum Lessianum, 1928), casus 682.

¹⁰ Genicot-Salsmans, *Institutiones Theologiae Moralis* (ed. 12a; Louvain: Museum Lessianum, 1931), II, n. 193.

¹¹ Noldin, *Summa Theologiae Moralis*, III, n. 143.

¹² Aertnys-Damen, *Theologia Moralis*, II, n. 145; Arregui, *Summarium Theologiae Moralis* (ed. 12a; Bilbao: El Mensajero del Corazón de Jesús, 1934), n. 545; Cappello, *De Sacramentis*, I, n. 490; Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology* (2d ed.; London: Sheed and Ward, 1936), III, 210; Piscetta-Gennaro, *Elementa Theologiae Moralis* (ed. 3a; Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1931 sqq.), V, n. 332; Ubach, *Compendium Theologiae Moralis* (Friburgi Brisgoviae: Herder, 1926-7), II, n. 587, note 4; Vermeersch, *Theologia Moralis* (ed. 3a; Romae: Pont. Università Gregoriana, 1933), III, n. 290.

make his confessions easy and fruitful. To allow him to omit the confessions would lead to a loss of reverence for the Holy Sacrifice and a loss of salutary horror for sin.¹³

Merkelbach strongly opposes this opinion on the grounds that it lacks solid foundation, that it has been unheard of until recently, and that it opens the door to abuse.¹⁴ Marc also opposes it.¹⁵ Bucceroni does not treat the case expressly, but he says that the lack of *copia confessorii* requires that there be no approved confessor available.¹⁶ Gury says that the penitent should not invent chimerical impossibility under the vain pretext of shame and embarrassment; the shame of a pastor confessing to his curate is intrinsic to confession and cannot excuse from this law.¹⁷

This opposition to the less severe opinion does not destroy its solid probability. Hence it may be safely followed in practice. Prudence, however, must guide the use of this opinion, lest it be unduly extended. A careful distinction must be made between difficulties which are intrinsic to the law and those which are merely extrinsic. Repugnance and embarrassment which ordinarily accompany confession of a shameful sin are intrinsic both to integral confession and to the law requiring confession of mortal sin before reception of the Holy Eucharist. But extraordinary embarrassment arising from circumstances not ordinarily connected with confession is properly called extrinsic to these obligations.

If exceptions are made in such restricted cases, the purpose of the law is not frustrated. But refusal to make such exceptions would impose a very grave burden on the penitent, a burden which would not have to be borne under ordinary conditions, and one which might be the occasion of sacrilegious reception of the sacraments. In order to avoid this burden, which is not intrinsic to the obligation of confessing mortal sin before celebrating Mass or receiving Communion, it is reasonable to admit that the obligation would cease in this difficulty, supposing, of

¹³ Vermeersch, *loc. cit.* ¹⁴ Merkelbach, *Summa Theologiae Moralis*, III, n. 272.

¹⁵ Marc-Gestermann-Raus, *Institutiones Morales Alphonsianae* (ed. 19a; Lugduni: Vitte, 1933-34), II, n. 1550.

¹⁶ Bucceroni, *Institutiones Theologiae Moralis* (ed. 6a; Romae: Ex Typographia Pontificia, 1914-15), III, n. 570.

¹⁷ Gury, *Compendium Theologiae Moralis* (ed. Dumas; Lugduni: Briday, 1874), II, n. 325; Gury, *Casus Conscientiae* (Lugduni: 1881), II, n. 288.

course, that there is perfect contrition and an urgent need for celebrating the Holy Sacrifice or receiving Communion, as this necessity is understood in canons 807 and 856.

The lack of a confessor, mentioned in these canons, may therefore be said to exist when extraordinary and morally insuperable embarrassment prevents a penitent from confessing to the one, or at most two, available confessors. Such circumstances may exist in the case of a layman about to receive Communion as well as in the case of a priest about to celebrate Mass; but the layman's case will be very rare, both because of the rarer familiarity with the confessor and because of the fewer occasions when there will be urgent need to receive the Holy Eucharist.

The obligation which ceases in accordance with this opinion is the obligation to go to confession, not the obligation of confessing integrally. These two laws impose distinct obligations. Canon 807 requires confession of mortal sin before celebrating Mass; canon 901 expresses the divine law that each mortal sin not yet directly absolved must be accused in the sacred tribunal when one receives the sacrament of penance. Whether or not extraordinary embarrassment is sufficient cause to excuse also from the integrity of confession, is another question.

EMBARRASSMENT AND INTEGRAL CONFESSION

In any discussion of integral confession, the distinction between material and formal integrity must be kept in mind. A confession is materially integral when it includes all mortal sins committed and not yet properly submitted to the power of a confessor. It is formally integral if all sins which here and now should be confessed are told to the confessor, even though some are omitted because of an excusing cause such as forgetfulness or danger of grave harm. The question here is whether extraordinary embarrassment is such an excusing cause.

Some authors, such as Arregui, Marc, and Vermeersch, do not discuss this question. Others, including Aertnys-Damen, Lehmkuhl (in his *Moral Theology* but not in his *Cases*), Prümmer, and Wouters, uphold the severe opinion.¹⁸ Merkelbach and Noldin, speaking generally, say

¹⁸ Aertnys-Damen, *op. cit.*, II, n. 306; Lehmkuhl, *Theologia Moralis* (ed. 12a; Friburgi Brigoviae: Herder, 1914), II, n. 327, but cf. his *Casus Conscientiae*, II, n. 157, *supra cit.*, note 8; Prümmer, *Manuale Theologiae Moralis* (ed. 8a; Friburgi Brigoviae: Herder, 1935-36), III, n. 380; Wouters, *Manuale Theologiae Moralis* (Brugis: Beyaert, s.a.), II, n. 327.

that loss of good name before the confessor does not excuse from confessional integrity, but do not treat the specific case of extraordinary embarrassment.¹⁹ Berardi, who held the less severe opinion in regard to confession before celebrating Mass, is also cited in favor of the less strict opinion in the matter of integral confession. But he expressly denies that extraordinary shame excuses from this obligation.²⁰

Piscetta-Gennaro write that some authors admit an excusing cause in this case, and they cite Genicot and Vermeersch.²¹ In the places cited, both these authors are treating of canon 807, and not of integral confession. Genicot in another place says that the opinion of Kenrick given above is not without some weight.²² He refers here to the opinion that a sin which is already indirectly absolved may be omitted from confession until there is an opportunity to confess it without extraordinary shame. According to Genicot, a lesser cause suffices for concealing such a sin than for concealing sins that have not yet been forgiven. He thus implicitly denies that extraordinary shame permits omission of an unforgiven sin when going to confession.²³

Davis also says that the less severe opinion is found in several authors and refers to his citations under his treatment of canon 807.²⁴ Cappello attributes this opinion to others, referring to Berardi, Genicot, Noldin, and Pighi.²⁵ As has been seen, these authors admit excuse from canon 807 but not from the law of integral confession.²⁶ Cappello's own opinion is that before the fact this excusing cause should not be admitted; but in a particular case, for very special reasons, it is not improbable.²⁷

Ubach says that it can be doubted whether the law of canon 807 and the law of integral confession, although very grave, have in view the

¹⁹ Merkelbach, *op. cit.*, III, n. 525; Noldin, *op. cit.*, III, n. 284.

²⁰ Berardi, *Praxis Confessariorum*, n. 1047, II.

²¹ Piscetta-Gennaro, *op. cit.*, V, n. 892; cf. Genicot-Salsmans, *op. cit.*, II, n. 193; Vermeersch, *op. cit.*, III, n. 290.

²² Genicot-Salsmans, *op. cit.*, II, n. 296. ²³ *Loc. cit.*

²⁴ Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology*, III, 381.

²⁵ Capello, *De Sacramentis*, II, part I, "De Poenitentia," n. 216.

²⁶ Pighi, *Cursus Theologiae Moralis* (ed. 4a; Veronae: 1926), IV, n. 144, q. 3, merely says that some authors admit extraordinary shame as an excusing cause in the law of canon 807; and in n. 269, q. 1, he says the same of integral confession; but in neither case does he embrace the opinion as his own.

²⁷ Capello, *loc. cit.*

very unusual circumstances in which there is extraordinary and insuperable embarrassment, and whether they really intend to command confession of a very shameful sin in such circumstances. He does not admit that the embarrassment is extrinsic to the obligation of the law. Instead, he has recourse to *epikeia*.²⁸

Thus only two authors, Cappello and Ubach, are found willing to sponsor this less severe opinion as their own, and Cappello does so with great reserve.

The authors who say that others hold this opinion cite passages in which these others are treating of a different question, namely the law of canon 807. To say that these authors, Cappello, Davis, and Piscetta-Gennaro, have missed the point of the question, would be rash. Rather it would seem that they see good reasons for transferring the solution from one case to the other. If so, they must consider these laws to be of almost equal gravity and to admit of the same excusing causes. Perhaps the fact that Cappello and Davis hold that canon 807 is probably an expression of divine law leads them to consider its gravity as equal to that of the law of integral confession, and to apply the same excusing causes to both.²⁹ Whether or not it is a divine law, the fact remains that the commonly accepted excusing causes of scandal or of defamation of priest or penitent are applied to both the law of integrity and the law of confession before receiving Holy Communion or celebrating Holy Mass.

After scandal and loss of good name before a third party, the next step in the scale of difficulty in observing these laws seems to be extraordinary embarrassment in confessing a shameful sin to a priest who is an intimate of the penitent. This difficulty would be due in great part to fear of losing a good name before such a confessor. It is solidly probable that this is sufficient excusing cause in the law of canons 807 and 856. Is it also sufficient in the law of integral confession? There are arguments in favor of an affirmative answer to this question.

The fact that the law of integrity is a divine law does not necessarily mean that it extends to every case, no matter what the difficulty. Although God can give the grace to fulfill any difficult command, He is not to be presumed to bind Himself to perform moral miracles in order

²⁸ Ubach, *Compendium Theologiae Moralis*, II, n. 587, note 4.

²⁹ Cappello, *De Sacramentis*, I, n. 488; Davis, *op. cit.*, III, 207-208.

to help His subjects to obey His laws when in certain circumstances obedience becomes morally impossible.³⁰ Divine positive law sometimes ceases to bind because the Legislator does not wish to extend its obligation to cases in which there is grave extrinsic difficulty. But if the difficulty is intrinsic to the obligation, it is clearly the will of the Legislator that it be borne.

An examination of the law of integral confession will show what embarrassment is intrinsic to the sacrament of penance. The sinner may confess in secret, to an entirely unknown priest, in a place where it is impossible for the confessor to recognize him. Any shame felt in such confession is certainly intrinsic to the obligation of confessing the sin. When these circumstances are changed but are still such as ordinarily occur, the embarrassment of confessing must still be considered intrinsic to confession. Thus a priest living in a city will ordinarily have to confess to some other priest of the same city; a priest in a small village or in a country parish will ordinarily have his choice of confessors restricted to priests in parishes at no great distance. But it is an extraordinary state of affairs when a priest cannot reach any but his curate without a long journey. So also it is an extraordinary condition when one can confess only to his brother, son, uncle, or very close friend.

When in such unusual circumstances morally insuperable embarrassment makes confession of some sin very repugnant, this is due to the circumstances, not to confession itself. Hence it is extrinsically connected with the obligation to confess the sin, and with Ubach it may well be doubted whether the divine Legislator, whose yoke is sweet and burden light, wishes to urge His law in such grave difficulty.³¹

In these circumstances the confessor may be considered under a double aspect. He is a priest, and as such he should be told all the sins of the penitent, no matter what the shame. But he is also a close friend to whom the penitent is very averse to expose his sordid actions. If the confessor were unknown, and a third person were in a position to overhear the confession, all authors admit that materially, integral confession would not be required. Of course, this danger to the seal of confession is not a parallel to the case in which the confessor himself is

³⁰ Noldin, *Summa Theologiae Moralis*, I, n. 140.

³¹ Ubach, *loc. cit.*

an intimate friend. But the intimacy adds a new difficulty which is not ordinarily experienced in confession, and which in effect is somewhat similar to having the confession overheard by an intimate friend. Is not this an extrinsic difficulty which in extreme cases may be sufficiently grave to excuse from materially integral confession?

Another argument in favor of this excusing cause might be developed from the opinion of Gousset, seen above. He said that the law of confessing before Mass does not require confession to one who might be indiscreet in the matter of the confessional secret. This is not to suggest that a close friend might be so indiscreet. Rather, the confessor might be brought involuntarily to a material violation of the seal. The shock of hearing the repugnant sin of a very familiar and highly respected friend cannot but impress itself upon the consciousness of the confessor. In the later relations between the penitent and confessor there may be a certain self-consciousness and aloofness in spite of perfect good will. In fact, conscious effort to avoid this might only serve to accentuate the difficulty. Any such consequence is at least an involuntary use of confessional knowledge and a material violation of the grave prescription of canon 890. If it is noticeable to others and leads them to suspect the facts, it is an indirect material violation of the sacramental seal. In either case it is apt to cause scruples in the confessor, to render the sacrament odious to the penitent, and to destroy the peace of mind of both. If in the circumstances there is a serious danger of this difficulty, its avoidance seems to be a sufficient reason to excuse from materially integral confession when one cannot confess except to a priest with whom he is very intimate.

As a further argument, we might make use of a proportion. Both in the law requiring confession before celebrating Mass and in the law of integral confession, the cessation of the obligation requires not only a moral impossibility of fulfilling the prescription, but also a moral necessity of acting. If it is simultaneously necessary to act and impossible to fulfill the law, then the obligation of the law ceases. If one must celebrate Mass but cannot confess his mortal sin, he may offer the Holy Sacrifice after making an act of perfect contrition. If one must make this particular confession but cannot confess a certain sin, the sacrament is valid although the sin is omitted.

A comparison of the relative gravity of the need to act which permits

action contrary to these laws should throw some light on the comparative gravity of the difficulty which makes the prescription morally impossible and permits action against the letter of the law.

In the question of integral confession the authors are not very severe in defining the moral necessity which will justify confession which cannot be materially integral. This necessity includes the need to fulfill the Paschal precept; the need to celebrate Mass or receive Holy Communion in order to avoid grave scandal or infamy; the necessity of otherwise remaining in the state of sin for some time. If one must wait two or three days for another opportunity to confess, the authors commonly agree that there is sufficient necessity to permit abbreviated confession in the moral impossibility of material integrity. Even one day is considered sufficient by many, including St. Alphonsus.³² Some find moral necessity to confess in cases where omission of confession would mean the loss of a great indulgence,³³ or the interruption of customary daily Mass or Communion.³⁴

On the other hand, a greater need to celebrate Mass is required to justify offering the Sacrifice without previous confession as prescribed by canon 807. Such need exists when Mass is necessary to prepare Viaticum for the dying; to avoid scandal or infamy; to fulfill a pastor's obligation of celebrating Mass for his people on a day of precept or of special devotion, or for a wedding or funeral. If a priest is not a pastor and no scandal or infamy is involved, St. Alphonsus says he may not celebrate in order that people may fulfill the Sunday precept. Prümmer agrees with him, but Vermeersch holds the opposite view.³⁵ For laymen, the need to receive their Paschal Communion is considered as probably sufficient by some authors,³⁶ while others say the Communion should be postponed.³⁷

³² S. Alphonsus, *Theologia Moralís*, lib. VI, n. 490; cf. Cappello, *De Sacramentis*, II, part I, n. 211; Marc-Gestermann-Raus, *Institutiones Morales*, II, n. 1698; Vermeersch, *Theologia Moralís*, III, n. 542.

³³ Vermeersch, *loc. cit.* But not when the impossibility of integral confession is due to the multitude of penitents: proposition condemned by the Holy Office, March 4, 1679, *Codicis Juris Canonici Fontes*, IV, n. 754, prop. 59.

³⁴ S. Alphonsus, *Theologia Moralís*, lib. VI, n. 490; De Lugo, *Disputationes Scholasticæ et Morales de Sacramentis* (Lugduni: 1644), disp. XVI, n. 530; cf. n. 414; cf. also Genicot-Salsmans, *Institutiones Theologiæ Moralís*, II, n. 294.

³⁵ Vermeersch, *op. cit.*, III, n. 290; Prümmer, *Manuale Theologiæ Moralís*, III, n. 193; S. Alphonsus, *op. cit.*, lib. VI, n. 261.

³⁶ S. Alphonsus, *loc. cit.*; Marc-Gestermann-Raus, *Institutiones Morales*, II, n. 1550.

³⁷ Prümmer, *op. cit.*, III, n. 193.

This comparison shows that a greater urgency is required in order to permit celebration of Mass without previous absolution of mortal sin than is required to permit confession which is not materially integral. Undoubtedly this is because of the great respect due to the Holy Eucharist on the one hand, and on the other the great importance of absolution and the consequent need of making it available to sinners in accordance with their moral power to use it.

But to act contrary to either of these laws, besides the moral necessity of confessing or of celebrating Mass, there must exist at the same time a sufficiently grave difficulty in observing the letter of the law. Such difficulty exists in relation to the law of canons 807 and 856 when morally insuperable embarrassment prevents confession before the celebration of Mass or the reception of Holy Communion.

Since the authors require a lesser need in order to permit confession which is not materially integral than to permit celebration of Mass without previous confession, it seems right to say that the difficulty required to make these laws morally impossible should be in the same proportion. If so, a lesser difficulty is required to excuse from materially integral confession than from confession itself when it is required before the celebration of Mass. In proportion to the moral necessity required in these two cases, the definition of moral impossibility of fulfilling the law of integral confession should be less severe than the definition of moral impossibility of confessing before celebrating Mass. Hence the difficulty that permits the entire omission of a required confession should also be sufficient to permit the omission of a part of the confession, provided that this difficulty is not intrinsic to the law which determines the essentials of confession. Extraordinary and morally insuperable embarrassment seems to be such a difficulty.

Against this solution of the question Aertnys-Damen object that shame is intrinsic to confession, and difference in intensity is merely an accidental circumstance.³⁸ It may be answered that difficulties which admit of gradation may be intrinsic to a law in their minor degrees but extrinsic in their more intense degrees. The difficulty of going to the church is intrinsic to the law of hearing Mass, since it is intended by the legislator as a necessary means to fulfill the law. But it is intrinsic only in its minor degrees. As the distance to the church increases, a point is reached where the necessary journey is beyond the will of the

³⁸ Aertnys-Damen, *Theologia Moralis*, II, n. 306.

legislator to impose. A further point may be reached where the journey would be beyond the power of a human legislator to impose. In the divine law of integral confession, the intensity of embarrassment due to extrinsic causes may reach an extraordinary degree which is beyond the will of the divine Legislator.

Another objection is found in the fact that the purpose of canon 807 can be attained by other means, i.e., by perfect contrition, but there is no substitute for the integrity required in a valid confession. In reply to this objection a distinction must be made. Material integrity is not necessary for valid absolution; formal integrity suffices, and this is confession of all sins whose accusation is here and now required by divine law. Some sins may be omitted temporarily for sufficient reason. Extraordinary embarrassment seems to be one of these reasons.

Perhaps the chief objection to the favorable solution of this question is the danger of abuse. If embarrassment is considered sufficient reason to excuse from materially integral confession, where is the line to be drawn between extraordinary, insuperable embarrassment, and the ordinary shame which is intrinsic to confession, or extrinsic shame which is not sufficiently grave to be an excusing cause? These distinctions do involve difficulties, but if the limits set by the authors cited above are clearly kept in mind, there will be little danger of abuse.

This danger is mitigated by the fact that the obligation to confess the shameful sin remains. Self-deception will be restrained by the knowledge that the sin must be confessed in the next confession made to a priest other than the one with whom the insuperable embarrassment is felt.

Although the favorable solution may be the occasion of self-deception, whereby one makes a nonintegral confession in good faith, the severe opinion may be the occasion of action in bad faith whereby sacrilege is preferred to integral confession. The former danger is the lesser evil. And this danger should not be magnified unduly. The combination of sinfulness presupposed in this question, joined with the circumstances which give rise to insuperable embarrassment, should be comparatively rare.

Furthermore, the danger of self-deception in this case does not seem

to be any graver than the same danger in the opinion which admits this excusing cause in the law of confessing before celebrating Mass. One who deceives himself in thinking that the embarrassment of mentioning a certain sin is grave enough to excuse him from including it in confession to an intimate friend, would also deceive himself in deciding that he could make an act of perfect contrition and omit the confession required by canon 807 or 856. Hence if the danger of abuse does not exclude this excusing cause in the one case, neither should it do so in the other.

Of course, there would be grave danger of abuse in either case if these opinions were spread abroad. They should not be taught indiscriminately to penitents who do not readily make distinctions and who might easily exaggerate the difficulty arising from their embarrassment in the confessional. Rather, these solutions are for the guidance of confessors who may meet such problems. Cases for the application of these opinions will ordinarily come to the confessor's attention after a penitent has, because of embarrassment, either used perfect contrition instead of confession, or considered himself justified in concealing some shameful sin in confession to an intimate friend. The confessor, using these principles, may then reassure the penitent or correct his laxity as the particular case demands.

Granting, at least for the sake of argument, that a confession is formally integral even though a shameful sin is omitted because of morally insuperable embarrassment, a question arises. Which would be the better procedure before celebrating Mass or receiving Communion in urgent cases: to confess without mentioning the shameful sin, or to omit the confession and make an act of perfect contrition? It would seem that either course could be followed. The choice would depend on subjective considerations.

Some penitents could not follow the reasoning which justifies the omission of the shameful sin in confession. These would feel more secure in using perfect contrition. Other penitents could follow this reasoning, or at least accept the confessor's direction with confidence. Although it is not difficult to make an act of perfect contrition, some of these latter penitents might have a greater sense of security after confession than after trusting to their ability to make an act of contrition.

The confessor should adapt his counsel to the particular penitent. The weight of authority supports the use of perfect contrition, rather than confession without mention of the shameful sin.

CONCLUSION

The law of canons 807 and 856 requires sacramental absolution of mortal sin before the celebration of Holy Mass or the reception of Holy Communion. It probably does not extend to the case in which extraordinary embarrassment causes a morally insuperable repugnance to confessing to the only available confessor, or two at the most. The presupposition of this case is that there is a sufficiently urgent need to celebrate Mass or receive Communion.

The extraordinary embarrassment here meant is embarrassment arising from circumstances which are not the ordinary conditions of confession. It is therefore not intrinsic to sacramental confession. It becomes morally insuperable and an excusing cause when the circumstances include the fact that the confessor is one who is closely united with the penitent by ties of blood, high esteem, or great familiarity, and the sin is unusually shameful.

Since few authors favor the application of this solution to the law of integral confession, this application does not have sufficient extrinsic probability to permit its use on the mere authority of its defenders. Has it intrinsic probability from the above arguments? Subject to correction, the writer submits that in these extraordinary circumstances partial confession, with the intention of confessing the concealed sin when another confessor is available, is formally integral as required by divine law. If there is sufficiently grave embarrassment to permit celebration of Mass or reception of Communion without previous confession of the shameful sin, there is also sufficiently grave difficulty to permit confession in which this sin is omitted for the present, to be confessed later to another confessor.