

Sergeant Jones and his Talks about Confession

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Introduction

Father O'Flanagan: Well! what's that? Can't you make out about Our Blessed Lady?

Jones: Oh! yes, I've no trouble about that. No, no, I've got a mother of my own, and I love her—God bless her, she was the good mother to me—and it would be an odd thing if Our Lord did not love His Mother, and do all He could for her, as I do all I can for mine. Bless us! no, that's not the hump on my back; that's natural enough.

Father O'Flanagan: Well! what is it? The Pope?

Jones: The Pope! God bless your honour, no. A family must have a father; I'm a father myself, and I know that that's common sense. The old woman's right there anyhow.

Father O'Flanagan: Well! what is it?

Jones: Your Reverence will laugh at me—it's telling my sins to the priest.

Father O'Flanagan: You don't like it?

Jones: Well! no, I don't, that's truth.

Father O'Flanagan: Nor do I, Jones, I can't bear it. There are many things I don't like. I don't like castor oil; I shouldn't like having my leg cut off; I don't know anybody who does like medicine, and cutting, and caustic, and all the other things that the doctors are so fond of giving other people. But if I had to choose between living with one leg or dying with two, I'd rather lose the leg and live. Nobody likes Confession, Jones; God does not mean us to like it.

Jones: Not mean us to like it?

Father O'Flanagan: Of course not. If He made the way back out of sin actually pleasant to us, it would be making sin a comfortable business. Where sin is, there must be pain. If one of your children offend you, Jones, you don't make it up with him too easily; you take some little notice of it, don't you?

Jones: Indeed I do, sir; what I stick at is that they should tell me the whole truth. And if I see they have told me the whole truth, and seem sorry, I don't say much to them then.

Father O'Flanagan: Quite so. Well! you see what you ask of your children God asks of you. Tell the whole truth and be sorry. But I suppose your children don't like telling you, do they?

Jones: No, they don't; it seems punishment enough to them, poor things, to have to tell me at all. They do cry some of them, yet they seem easier after.

Father O'Flanagan: Exactly; and you, a grown man, are afraid of the pain you give your children. Is it not so?

Jones: Well! I don't know, but your Reverence may be right. Still, why can't we confess to God?

Father O'Flanagan: Because it is not the will of God. He does not choose to have it so. And one reason why He does not choose it is because it would not be good for us.

Jones: Not good for us?

Father O'Flanagan: No. It makes things too comfortable. This is easy work to go down on your knees and call yourself a miserable sinner. But you don't take that from your children, Jones; you don't let them say to you, "Please, father, we will tell God in our prayers to-night." You want them to tell you.

Then again, what a man can do whenever he likes, just at his own choice, never gets done at all. It's different when you have a priest to remind you of your duty, and to bring you to it at proper times.

Besides, you wouldn't take the same trouble to find out your faults; you wouldn't look into your conscience, and see what you have done wrong half so carefully, if you were not obliged to tell the truth and the whole truth to some man, and to put it into clear words so that he might know.

And then—you see I've plenty of reasons, Jones—

Jones: Yes! your Reverence was always good at a reason; that's what the missus says.

Father O'Flanagan: Well! I won't give you all of them, only this one more. It is good to tell our sins to our fellow-man, because he helps us to see them as they ought to be seen. Consciences get wrong like minds and bodies; no man has an infallible conscience; mind that, Jones, because people talk in these days as if their consciences all kept Greenwich time and couldn't possibly go wrong. Nothing gets out of order so easily as a conscience. We like ourselves, Jones, better than other people like us; and so we varnish up our sins, and make them look respectable. And another man rubs the varnish off, and shows us our sins without their clothes, jackdaws without the peacock's feathers. He asks us a question or two and drags out two or three sins which we had put away in the lumber-room, and forgotten all about them. Then he puts another question or two, and off drops a grand dress we had made for some pet sin, and we see it as it is, not a man but a monkey. All those fine excuses we had been spinning, "we couldn't help it," and "somebody made us," and all the rest, they go like cobwebs; but they wouldn't go if we went down at our bedside and said we were sinners. David didn't see himself as other men saw him, till Nathan came and helped him.

Jones: I dare say your Reverence is right about that; there may be some use in telling our sins to our fellows after all.

Father O'Flanagan: And, therefore, for our good it is the will of God that our sins should be forgiven through our fellows. He might have forgiven in other ways; He chooses to forgive in this way, because so He can get Himself more souls, and make those souls more careful, more afraid of sin, more sorry for sins done.

Jones: Of course if it is God's will, as your Reverence says, then we must do it. But show me more clearly that it is His will. It is so strange that man should forgive man's sins—how can sinful man forgive sinful man! It does seem so strange.

Father O'Flanagan: It sounds odd to you, but only because you do not see it rightly. Let me put the thing another way. That God should forgive sins through God's messengers, there is nothing very strange in that.

Jones: No, that sounds right enough.

Father O'Flanagan: Well! that is all. The priest is nothing, God is all. Now tell me, Jones; you see I am going to write on this paper: tell me now, truly, who writes, I or the pen?

Jones: Well! your Reverence puzzles me. It ain't you, and it ain't the pen exactly. It is the two of you together.

Father O'Flanagan: Quite so. Without the pen I should make queer writing; but the pen without me could do nothing at all. It lies on the table, and unless I take it up there it lies. But tell me, Jones, who has the power in it, I or the pen? Does the pen write of its own power or by mine?

Jones: By yours, of course, your Reverence.

Father O'Flanagan: It is not by any power in the goose-quill and feathers, not by its nature as a pen, that the thoughts come out of my mind and go down upon that paper?

Jones: No! your Reverence, I never saw a thinking, moving pen.

Father O'Flanagan: It writes then as my messenger, not simply as a goose-quill. The pen can do things above its nature, above its own powers by the power of a nature stronger than itself. Well!

Jones, as the pen is to me, so am I to God. Of my own power, by my nature as a man, I can do nothing. Like the pen I lie idle. But God takes me up and uses me, and then I can scratch out the sins upon a soul; but not through my power, so that a man only forgives sins (except, indeed, that he knows what he is about, and need not do it unless he likes, while a pen must whether it likes or not), in the same sense in which a pen writes a book. Nobody praises Dickens' pen instead of Dickens. So no Catholic gives to the priest by himself the power which belongs to God.

Jones: I see, your Reverence, it is different from what I thought before. But has God chosen to use man as His pen?

Father O'Flanagan: Well! it is Saturday night, I must run off to hear Confessions. Come on Monday night, and we'll have another talk.

TALK I: PEN AND INK

Father O'Flanagan: Well! Jones, have you come to make your Confession to-night?

Jones: Not to-night, your Reverence. I can't bring myself to it yet. I must know more about it.

Father O'Flanagan: Then I must go on trying to make out if you ever must do it. Indeed, telling you my sins; but if you can show me it's right, I'll do it, that I will.

Father O'Flanagan: Spoken like a man, and a good man, Jones. I wish everyone was like you so far at all events. Well! I was talking about a pen last time, and saying the priest in the hand of God was like a pen in the hand of a writer. You remember?

Jones: Yes, I remember. As the pen doesn't write of itself, so the priest cannot forgive sins by himself, but by the power of God.

Father O'Flanagan: Exactly. Now let me go on a bit with that. You see me take up this pen now, and I try to write, but I find I can't write a word.

Jones: It would be a wonder if your Reverence could; why! you've got no ink.

Father O'Flanagan: So something else is wanted besides the pen and the hand that holds it?

Jones: Of course.

Father O'Flanagan: So with the priest, Jones. The priest is the pen, and God is the hand that holds it, but the ink without which God cannot write upon the soul is the Precious Blood of our dearest Lord. It is that by which our sins are forgiven, Jones.

Jones: So I always thought, your Reverence; but they always told me that you Catholic priests gave out you could forgive sins without that.

Father O'Flanagan: Oh! Falsehood, falsehood, falsehood! Truly in this world there are two things stronger than cannon and armour. The one is truth, but the other falsehood. And I sometimes think falsehood is the strongest. Marvellous is the power of lying. And verily the English know how to use it when they talk of Catholics.

Jones: What! is there no truth in it, your Reverence?

Father O'Flanagan: There is not the shadow of a shade of truth, Jones. It is falsehood complete, whole, entire. Truth! why the Catholic truth is, that not the forgiveness of sins only, but every lightest blessing of every sort, comes to us from the Precious Blood that flowed upon the Cross.

Jones: The old woman's right again, then. Your Reverence will forgive me, but, though the old woman's not much of a scholar, yet somehow she seems to know almost as much about it as you do yourself.

Father O'Flanagan: Right you are, Jones. It is not only to a priest, but to "babes and sucklings," to the poor and the lowest of the poor, that God's true Gospel is preached. Now then for another thing, Jones. See! I have got ink in the pen now, and I am writing. But the ink won't mark, it is all blotchy; the ink goes out of the pen, but it can't get properly on to the paper.

Jones: Your Reverence has got dirty paper; it won't take ink. You may write for ever, but you won't get anything to show for it.

Father O'Flanagan: Quite so. You must have the pen, and the hand that holds it, and the ink, but also the paper should be ready. It does no good if the paper is all foul with dirt or grease; it will take no writing. Now, so it is in the forgiveness of sins. The priest is the pen, and God is the hand that holds, and the Precious Blood is as the ink which writes, but the soul is the paper; and if the soul is not made ready by true and real sorrow, if it is all foul with unrepented sin, the Precious Blood with all its power cannot write upon that soul.

Jones: Repentance? Why! your Reverence, they always told me that what you priests wanted was money, not repentance. Don't they always say that you forgive whether a man is sorry or not, and that you even give leave for wicked things like murder to be done beforehand, and all for money?

Father O'Flanagan: God forgive them, Jones. Did not the same sort of people say that Our Lord was a glutton and a wine-bibber?

Jones: It's all false, then, your Reverence?

Father O'Flanagan: False, Jones! The wickedest, most hateful, most absurd of lies. Money! do you think we should have our Confessionals crowded every Saturday night for five or six weary hours by the poorest of the poor, by rags and filth and vermin, if we wanted money? Do you think we should spend hours hearing the confessions of children, if we wanted money? Do you think we should go about battle-fields to the wounded, and ride as I have known a priest ride, on the cannon up to the assault into the midst of the thick volley, if we wanted money? Do you get money out of London poor, and little children, and dying soldiers? Oh! shame, Jones! I did not think you believed such rubbish.

Jones: No! your Reverence, I don't. I used once, and I took care the old woman had nothing to bring you when she came. But when I found you heard her just the same, and I found she went to Confession as often, I gave that up.

Father O'Flanagan: Why! it would be the most sinful of sins to take money for the grace of God.

Jones: But, I think, your Reverence, I have heard of money being given to the priest by people going to Confession.

Father O'Flanagan: You have perhaps heard of people willingly and of their own accord offering money, just as money is offered at baptisms or churchings, or what not. If a person uses a priest's time, and gives a priest trouble in any way, he is of course always at liberty to offer him money if he chooses. I suppose, Jones, if people use your time and give you trouble, you expect money, don't you?

Jones: Indeed I do, your Reverence.

Father O'Flanagan: Very well; but here is the difference between you and the priest. You can require the money, you can demand it; and if people won't give it you, you can make them give it. But a priest must give his time and his labour without money; he can never demand—never require it; and if people give him money, they give it as a free-will offering, because they want to keep him that he may serve them for nothing. Then when such an offering is made, it is not meant for baptism, or penance, or absolution. We never say, "Give me money, or if you give nothing, I will not forgive." The grace of God is beyond all price, and the gathered wealth of the cities of the world could not purchase a single absolution from one poor priest. Nevertheless, if a priest is any good he must live; and it would be a bit of a shame, Jones, would it not, if the man who spent his life in helping you to save your soul, was to die of starvation?

Jones: Right you are, your Reverence; you'll never starve for one, so long as the old woman's alive. She's the good heart, she is, bless her!

Father O'Flanagan: Very well, Jones, hence the use of offerings. But now enough of this. Bah! even talking of money about such matters makes one sick at heart. I would there were no money in the world! Now for the other matter—the sorrow. Can you baptise, Jones, without water?

Jones: I don't know much about such matters, your Reverence, but I don't think you can.

Father O'Flanagan: Certainly not: nor, Jones, can a priest forgive without sorrow. Sorrow is as necessary for Confession as water for Baptism. Of course sorrow is not forgiveness. Your children may be sorry when they are naughty, Jones, but you may nevertheless not forgive them for a while. Sorrow is what man offers to God, forgiveness is what God gives to man. But no sorrow no forgiveness; just as if there were no sins there could be no forgiveness. Sins sorrowed for, that is what man brings; forgiveness, that is what God sends. And God sends it through His messenger, the priest: so when the priest's absolution touches the sins sorrowed for, then God's forgiveness through the Precious Blood washes the sins away.

Now mark, Jones, what sort of sorrow the Church wants, and then tell me whether it is sorrow enough. First, Jones, hatred of past sins. You wish you had never done them, you would like to undo them; you can't undo them; what is done, God help us! cannot be undone; so you bring them to the Precious Blood, and the Precious Blood does what you cannot do, undoes your sins, destroys them, so they are slain and dead and crucified, never to rise again.

Well! now secondly, resolution not to do them again, never. This is common sense; a man who was exceedingly sorry for treading on your toes, but had the fullest intention of doing it again, would not seem to you mightily distressed.

Jones: Certainly not, your Reverence.

Father O'Flanagan: So much then for the absurd charge of giving leave for sins beforehand. It is simply one of those superb falsehoods which are as thick as blackberries outside the Church, those grand, lasting, fossil, antediluvian falsehoods, like the big beasts at the Crystal Palace—which, beasts as they are, and ugly enough and savage enough in all conscience, one cannot help admiring, because they are such fine specimens of that savagest of animals that ever was in Paradise—a Lie.

Jones: Your Reverence is very severe.

Father O'Flanagan: Not at all, Jones. I was never one to care for good evergreen lies; they do so last and spread and bloom. There is no killing them; fine full-blown peonies of lies, whose leaves never fall nor pale nor wither. But to go on—

Thirdly, Jones, your true sorrow must not only mean to give up sins, but to give up all occasion of sin, anything that would lead you into sin. A drunkard who wants to give up the drink, but not to give up going into the "Black Lion" where he always gets drunk, would not be in earnest, Jones. And an infidel who gave up his infidelity, but did not mean to give up his infidel books and infidel companions would be, to use a rough word, playing the fool.

And then, fourthly, restitution; character blackened must be made white, if possible; honour taken away must be given back by apology; money stolen, goods injured, little frauds and little cheatings, all must be replaced, and where this cannot be done to the people wronged, then to the poor. Now, Jones, are Catholics in earnest or not?

Jones: They are in earnest, your Reverence; the sorrow part of it is right enough. I will go and talk it over with the old woman, my head is too full for more to-night.

TALK III: GOD'S USE OF MAN

Father O'Flanagan: Well! Jones, have you talked it over with the old woman?

Jones: Yes, your Reverence, and I think I am getting clearer on it. It seems to me more sensible, the more I think of it. It don't seem so unreasonable and so presumptuous like as I used to fancy.

Father O'Flanagan: You see about the priest being only an instrument, only a messenger?

Jones: Yes, still that's not all my trouble; but before I go on, I want to ask your Reverence about something the old woman said last night. I was telling her just in my fun—for I like to tease her sometimes, it sets her tongue a-going, and I do love to hear her talk, she's better than any parson—so I was telling her that Confession was made by the priests for the people, to keep them under. So she says, "Why! bless you, John," she says, "the priests go to Confession a deal oftener than the people do." Well! I says, just to vex her a bit more, "I reckon that's because they don't charge anything for it, just like the doctors who dose each other for nothing"; so with that she got very wild and came and gave me a kiss, as she generally does when she's wild, or I shouldn't be so fond of teasing her. But what I want to know is whether it's true that priests go to Confession too, as well as other people.

Father O'Flanagan: Of course it is, Jones, and I think you'll find they go much oftener, because they say Mass every day, and they dare not say Mass with unforgiven sin upon them.

Jones: But the Pope, he doesn't go to Confession, does he?

Father O'Flanagan: As much as anybody else. I never was a Pope, you see, Jones; but I should think he would go more than anybody else, because he has so many souls and so many duties to answer for. Heaven help us! it's bad enough to be a priest, it must be dreadful to be a Pope. I wonder he's not at Confession all day.

Jones: But how's that, your Reverence? Don't you all say you get your power of forgiving sins from the Pope?

Father O'Flanagan: Certainly, from the Pope under God.

Jones: Well! how can he give the power of forgiving sins to a priest, and then get his own sins forgiven by him? How can he give a man the power to forgive himself? I think I've got your Reverence there.

Father O'Flanagan: Not quite, I think, Jones. He gives the power to forgive sins as Pope, as Head Bishop of Bishops; but he goes to Confession as man. His office of Pope is one thing; his life as a man, his sins and faults, his failure to do his office properly through human weakness, all these are another thing; as Pope, he is above the priest to whom he confesses; as man, he is for the time below him, and the priest who hears him is sent by God to him to rebuke, to exhort, to forgive, even, if need be, to keep back or refuse forgiveness, just as with the meanest layman on the earth's face. Priests and Bishops and Popes at their Confessions are as other men, mere laymen as it were for the time.

Jones: I see: so his power of Pope, just like a priest's power, has nothing to do with himself like! Just as, your Reverence will pardon a rough sort of likeness, policeman Brown takes you up to the Court by his right as policeman, not by any power in himself as Tom Brown.

Father O'Flanagan: Well! Jones, I never heard the Pope compared to a policeman before, but there's something in it, you're not so very far wrong. But now for your real trouble, what is it?

Jones: Well! your Reverence, I see Confession's not unreasonable, supposing God has ordered it; but the question is, has God ordered it? One would think God would forgive sin Himself, not through men. If He chooses to do it through men, of course it is His will, and we can say nothing against it. But has He so chosen? It seems so strange that man should forgive man!

Father O'Flanagan: Well now, Jones! You and I are so different, that to me it would seem almost strange if man did not forgive man!

Jones: Strange!

Father O'Flanagan: Well! strange may be a strong word, but I mean that it would not be so like as it is to all God's other ways of dealing with us. When God made the world, He gave it to the children of men; they were to manage it. He gave Adam Paradise, and Adam was to keep it. It was his own, his castle, like an Englishman's home, and even God would not interfere with him, would not break in, letting him to do as he liked. God gives freely. He does not give and then say, "Do with it what you like, use it, abuse it, you are master." And there is the free gift, your own, and to your heart's content. And if God is still the King of His own world, as He is, still He rules it and manages it and does all things in it through men. To begin at the very beginning, who made you, Jones?

Jones: Why! God, of course. I'm not so ignorant as not to know that, your Reverence.

Father O'Flanagan: True, Jones; you and all things else that have been or will be. And God is the only Creator; He alone is Life, and the giver of life. He alone, Who is Being, can make things to be. Not the highest angel in Heaven, not Mary herself can create; God only; nor can God give this power to others; He cannot create Creators. And yet, Jones, even here, God is pleased to call man in, and bid him help Him. At the first when He created Adam, no man helped Him in that, for there was no man to help; but since that time God has created men, not as He created Adam, but using the help of other men. God creates children now, as He created Adam, but then by Himself, now not without the help of their parents, who are in a sense fellow-creators with God. Is this right, Jones?

Jones: Yes! your Reverence has an odd way of putting things; I never thought of it before; but it's right. It's the pen again, your Reverence.

Father O'Flanagan: Yes, Jones, it's the pen again. God alone creates, God alone forgives sin. Yet God uses man in creating man; is there anything much more strange in His using man in forgiving man? The one is His power, the other is His mercy. If men are to share His power, why not His mercy also.

Jones: There's a difference somehow, your Reverence, but I cannot quite see yet what it is.

Father O'Flanagan: I'll tell you directly. I see where the knot is. But let us go on. God not only creates men through men, but He preserves men through men. Men are His Providence to their fellow-men. God alone can give life, God alone can preserve life. Yet as parents are after a fashion fellow-creators with God, so are they a fellow-Providence with God. God only gave life to that chubby little rascal of yours, Patsy; He preserves that life He gave, but if the mother refused him milk, if you did not work, like an honest fellow as you are, to keep the soul in the old woman, why! the soul would go out of the old woman, Jones, and poor little Patsy would die. Now you think the priest claims a great power in forgiving sins: see what you are yourself, Jones—a Creator and a Providence, a giver and preserver of life.

Jones: Am I all that, your Reverence? I never thought of it; you give me a sort of respect for myself which I never had before.

Father O'Flanagan: You never thought how wonderful and great man is, how thoroughly man has received the likeness of God, and how good God is who has given such power unto men. Oh! how good God is, Jones, how good God is!

Jones: That's what the old woman is always saying. I see so much of that about you Catholics. It comes so natural to you to think of God, and you seem somehow tender and affectionate to Him, as I don't think we are at all.

Father O'Flanagan: Well! I must go on. God creates men through men, preserves men through men, and governs men through men, gives rewards and punishments through men.

Jones: How is that, your Reverence?

Father O'Flanagan: Through the kings, the judges, the other rulers of the world. The laws under which you live are made by your fellow-men to whom God has given the power. They are fellow-kings with Him in ruling and arranging His world. To them He has given His power of punishing; even He has called them into a share of the power which mostly He keeps in His own hands, the power of taking life away, the power of death. So men share God's power in creating and preserving, God's justice in punishing;—why not also God's mercy?

Jones: Well! your Reverence, there's a difference somehow, but I can't hit on it.

Father O'Flanagan: Is it this? You mean that all I have been saying has to do with this world, and absolution has to do with the next? The other things touch the body, but forgiveness touches the soul, and gives something which is greatly above our nature. God has given earth to the children of men, that you think right enough; but in absolution He seems to have given heaven also.

Jones: That's somewhere about it.

Father O'Flanagan: Very well! now let us see whether He does not give men the things of the next world through men, as well as the things of this. If He does it in other matters, it is not so surprising as it otherwise would be, if He does it in forgiveness also. But perhaps I have spoken enough for to-night, let us break off until another time.

TALK IV: "ONE DOESN'T THINK HOW GREAT IT ALL IS"

Father O'Flanagan: Now, Jones, are you clear where we are?

Jones: Pretty well, your Reverence. You were saying that for God to forgive sins through men is like what He has always done since He made the world. He has always managed men through men.

Father O'Flanagan: And you don't think I've quite made it out?

Jones: Well! about the things of this world. It is clear that men manage their fellow-men in things of this world. But about Heaven. How does God give the things of the next world through men?

Father O'Flanagan: We will talk about that now, Jones. We shall find that from the first God has given the things of heaven in some measure through men. Now, first of all, you have children; do they ever say prayers?

Jones: Don't they, your Reverence! I and the old woman, we train them to it, with their little hands folded at their mother's knee, and lisp and half-cry, little Lizzie looking so reverent-like, and calling God, Our Dada, when she says the Lord's Prayer.

Father O'Flanagan: It is very beautiful to see children pray, when they pray well. But, now, Jones, do you think it will help them to Heaven?

Jones: Of course it will, that's what the old woman says. Set them on the road to Heaven, says she, before they can walk, make them say their prayers before they can talk, and their feet and their tongues will never know no other use.

Father O'Flanagan: And supposing you and the old woman never taught them their prayers. There are children, Jones, God help them, by thousands down in the gutters of London and the worse gutters of Liverpool, and other gutters nearly as bad of every large town in England; they grow up to drink, to swear, to thief, to be foul with foulness beyond thought, because there was no one to teach them, and no one to love. Fathers who were no fathers begot them and thought no more. Mothers who were no mothers bore them and flung them in the gutter to rot or scramble into life as chance might lead. Will they know God and the road to Heaven? Would your children know God and the road to Heaven unless you and the mother taught them?

Jones: I don't see how they could, your Reverence. It ain't picked up so easy.

Father O'Flanagan: Then, Jones, see how Heaven, and the things of Heaven, are given to men through men. Good parents, and a child saved: bad parents, and a child lost. You see, God not only creates men through men, preserves men through men, governs men through men, rewards and punishes men through men, but He also educates men through men. He creates the Reason—but when He has created it He leaves it to men to make it grow. As with the body, men may neglect the child's body and the child shall die; so with the soul, men may neglect the child's reason, and the reason shall grow wild and useless. And not only does He educate men through men, but He leaves the knowledge of Himself to be given to men through men. Train the child's reason ever so much, yet if you do not teach him of God he will scarcely know of Him, or may make fancies of Him wrongly. The clear knowledge of God must come through man. No knowledge of God, no heaven; no teaching about God, no knowledge of Him; therefore Heaven and the things of Heaven are very much left in the hands of our fellow-men, to give to us or to keep from us, as they will. God is giving your children the knowledge of Himself—but how? Through you and your wife. You two are God's Priests to your own children—to save by teaching—to destroy by not teaching.

Jones: It is true, I never thought that my children's souls lay in my hands that way. Your Reverence makes things seem so great. Smoking one's pipe alongside of the old woman, and talking about the children, one doesn't think how great it all is.

Father O'Flanagan: Then again your ministers. Haven't there any good in them? Now don't try me.

Jones: Well! the old woman says she never saw no good in them.

Father O'Flanagan: Ah; I see she comes from the old country. But what I mean is, what is supposed to be their work—what are they for?

Jones: I suppose they are meant to teach the people, to explain the Scriptures, and so forth.

Father O'Flanagan: Very well. Your having ministers shows that you think God gives the things of Heaven through your fellow-man. You yourselves call sermons and such like the means of grace! Your preachers say that God blesses their ministry to the salvation of souls. Mr. Spurgeon is one who awakens souls and the like. In other words, God touches the soul of man through his fellow-man. Is it not so?

Jones: I suppose it is.

Father O'Flanagan: Very well; then it seems to me that if God teaches the knowledge of Himself to men through their fellow-men, if He touches the consciences of men through men, and calls men to repent through men, it is but a step in the same direction to forgive men's sins through men. If men can make men repent, why should they not be able to give forgiveness also?

Jones: But our ministers say it is the Holy Scriptures which do it all.

Father O'Flanagan: Well! certainly not all; for they put great importance on preaching themselves. But, as you have spoken of them, about the Holy Scriptures, here is another case. The Holy Scriptures tell men about Heaven, and lead men to Heaven; do they not?

Jones: Yes, your Reverence, we all agree in that.

Father O'Flanagan: We all agree in that. Well! these very Holy Scriptures; how were they given us—how do they come to us?

Jones: How does your Reverence mean?

Father O'Flanagan: I mean, did God write the Holy Scriptures as He created the world, with His own hands, with no one to help Him? Or as He creates man through man, preserves man through man, governs man through man, educates man through man, teaches man about himself through man, converts man through man, so did He send the Holy Scriptures to man through man?

Jones: Of course He did: men wrote them.

Father O'Flanagan: The ten commandments—have they to do with Heaven, and the getting it?

Jones: Of course they have.

Father O'Flanagan: Who gave them?

Jones: God.

Father O'Flanagan: Moses.

Jones: God gave them to Moses.

Father O'Flanagan: Moses gave them to his fellow-men. He gave them to men through a fellow-man. Moses; if God gives commandments on men through men—why not forgive sins through men also? But it is not only the ten commandments. Were not all the Scriptures written by men?

Jones: By God through men.

Father O'Flanagan: Exactly so: and what are the Scriptures but the knowledge of God and the knowledge of God's will—God's threatenings, God's punishments, God's mercies? And all that comes to us through our fellow-men; so that if the Revelation of God is given to men through men,

why not also the forgiveness of God? Now mark, besides; the whole history of the Scripture is a history of God's dealing with man through man. If He punishes Pharaoh for his obstinacy, it is through Moses and his rod. If He takes away His punishments when he repents, it is still through man. If He sends messages to His people, it is still through Moses, or through the High Priest going and consulting Him. If He punishes or forgives His people, it is still through Priest and Prophet. Elias—"Elijah" you term him—shuts up the Heavens; Elias opens them, Elias raises to life; the very bones of Eliseus give life. If Hezekias live it is Isaias who gives him life—man through man. God's justice, God's mercy, conveyed to man through man. Now have I reason for saying that it is God's custom to deal with man through man; and that therefore to forgive sins through man is simply according to the custom of God, and that it would be less like Him, if He did not?

Jones: I think your Reverence has reason.

Father O'Flanagan: I have still more to say; another night will do.

TALK V: WHAT SAY THE GOSPELS?

Father O'Flanagan: Well! Jones! some more talk about Confession?

Jones: If you please, your Reverence; I want you to show me that God HAS chosen to forgive man's sins through man.

Father O'Flanagan: You see now that He could so choose if He liked, and that it would not be wonderful if He did so choose: not wonderful but according to His usual ways.

Jones: Yes! your Reverence; now I want you to show me that He HAS so chosen.

Father O'Flanagan: Very well. You have brought your Protestant bible, I see. You know we Catholics don't grant you that your Protestant Bible is the Bible at all or has any authority: however, you think it has, and so we will take your Protestant translation instead of our own, lest you should say I am unfair. So open your book and turn to St. Matthew, chapter ix., verses 2 to 8, and then St. Mark, chapter ii., verses 3 to 12.

Jones: I have it, your Reverence, about healing the sick of the palsy.

Father O'Flanagan: Yes! you know the history. You remember those who brought the palsied man, came so full of faith in Our Lord, that when they were driven back by the great crowd, they went around and up on the roof, uncovered it, and let the palsied man down right before Our Lord. Our Lord saw their faith and said, "Be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee!" The scribes and the learned men began to think about these words, and in their hearts they accused Our Lord of blasphemy. Our Lord, to show it was not blasphemy, works the miracle and heals the palsied man.

Jones: Yes, your Reverence, I have it.

Father O'Flanagan: Well! now, keep the pages open while I go through with it. Now then, first of all, there was an enormous crowd gathered together about Our Lord; what He does and says is not done and said privately, as when He talks to Nicodemus or the Apostles, but openly before the ignorant, uneducated, uncultivated mob. Is that so?

Jones: Yes! there was such a crowd that the bearers of the palsied man could not push through. "There was no room," it says, "not so much as about the door."

Father O'Flanagan: Exactly. Then, secondly, please to notice that this was just at the beginning of Our Lord's public preaching, in the first of the three years; the utmost possible attention was called to everything He did and said, because of His wonderful miracles; men were asking, can He be the Messiah? Still, did anyone of that immense multitude think Him to be God?

Jones: I don't know, your Reverence; did they?

Father O'Flanagan: Surely not one. If you remember, it was specially given to St. Peter to confess, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." His Godhead was hidden even from His Apostles until that confession, and men said, "Some John the Baptist, some Elias, others Jeremias or one of the Prophets," right up to the third year of His public preaching; but none said, certainly none in the first year, that He was the Christ the Son of the living God.

Jones: True, your Reverence.

Father O'Flanagan: You see Peter got a special blessing for knowing Him to be God in the third year, after He had been with Him as an Apostle for some two years, seeing all He did and hearing all He said; so that in the first year no one of that great crowd at the door of His house in Capharnaum—Capernaum as you call it—would know Him to be God.

Jones: No, your Reverence, I don't see well how they could.

Father O'Flanagan: Yet they believed Him to have the power to heal?

Jones: Of course they did, or they wouldn't have taken this mighty trouble about the roof, and letting the poor man down on the heads of the people.

Father O'Flanagan: Would they think He had the power of Himself as a man, or from God as a Prophet of God?

Jones: I suppose they thought He was a wonderful Prophet, like one of the old ones they had heard of in the Bible.

Father O'Flanagan: Exactly; and those old ones—would the people think that they did their miracles by their own power, or by God's power?

Jones: Oh! by God's power, of course. That's what they learnt: Moses got water out of a rock through God, not through himself.

Father O'Flanagan: Then this crowd of poor and ignorant people thought of Our Lord as a man—only a man, mark you—teaching in the name of God, and working miracles by the power of God?

Jones: I don't see what your Reverence is driving at: you'll be coming round the corner at me by-and-bye with something or other like a shot.

Father O'Flanagan: Well! they thought Him to be a man, and man only. Into the midst of this crowd they let down the palsied man. How everybody must have looked to see what Our Lord would do! Would He touch the sick man, and he would rise? Would He be angry at their letting him down like that? What would He do? What did He do, Jones, as a matter of fact, in the midst of this staring listening crowd? Did He cure him at once?

Jones: No, not at once. He let him lie till they murmured at Him.

Father O'Flanagan: What did He do?

Jones: He said, "Son, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee!"

Father O'Flanagan: Your own translation, Jones?

Jones: Yes, the Protestant Bible, your Reverence.

Father O'Flanagan: He said, "Thy sins be forgiven thee."

Jones: Yes.

Father O'Flanagan: And the crowd thought Him only a man?

Jones: Only a man.

Father O'Flanagan: And a man claiming to forgive sins?

Jones: I suppose so.

Father O'Flanagan: Would Our Lord know that they thought Him only a man, and a man claiming to forgive sins?

Jones: Of course he would. He saw the thoughts of the Scribes. He would see the thoughts of all.

Father O'Flanagan: Did the man rise immediately Our Lord said, "Thy sins be forgiven thee?"

Jones: No, he did not. There he lay still.

Father O'Flanagan: I suppose his sins were forgiven him?

Jones: Surely Our Lord would not say so if they were not.

Father O'Flanagan: Then Our Lord could not simply mean, "your illness which is the punishment of sin be forgiven thee," or else the man would have risen at once. Now mark what Our Lord does. All thought Him a man. All heard Him say, "Thy sins be forgiven thee." All wondered. What a hush must have come over the great crowd, as the sweet words made their quiet strong way to the most distant ear! How must they have looked into each other's faces, and pushed reverently nearer! In the silence not a word was said; even the Scribes thought, but dared not speak. And as His words rang into heart after heart, the Eyes of the great Teacher saw into the depths of each. He had worked many a miracle before, but He had never yet spoken such words, and He spoke them now, we are told, because He "saw their great faith." And as He spoke the words, where the great faith was, there was no murmuring, and where the great faith was not, there hearts murmured. They who murmured, Jones, were they who knew the Scripture best and thought themselves so great and good.

Jones: The Scribes.

Father O'Flanagan: And why did they murmur?

Jones: They said, "This man blasphemeth. Why does this man speak blasphemies?"

Father O'Flanagan: What was the blasphemy, Jones?

Jones: Forgiving sins. "Who," they said, "can forgive sins but God only?"

Father O'Flanagan: Exactly, and as Our Lord seemed to them only a man, what right had He to forgive sins?

Jones: I suppose that was it.

Father O'Flanagan: But did not the multitude think the same?

Jones: They don't seem to have done so. They seem to have taken it quite quietly.

Father O'Flanagan: Then the multitude was wrong surely, and the Scribes right.

Jones: Your Reverence is one too many for me.

Father O'Flanagan: It was the Scribes who were wrong, you see, Jones. Our Lord is particularly angry with them. "Why do ye think EVIL in your hearts?" Was it evil to think that God only can forgive sins?

Jones: How can that be evil, your Reverence?

Father O'Flanagan: Would it be right in the multitude to think that man by his own power could forgive sins?

Jones: No, your Reverence, surely not.

Father O'Flanagan: Then, why is Our Lord angry with the Scribes and pleased with the crowd? Was He angry with the Scribes for not knowing He was God?

Jones: No, the others didn't know He was God.

Father O'Flanagan: Well! I suppose, at all events, Our Lord soon put it right. He said to them all, "I am God, I forgive sins not as man, but as God; therefore, it is not blasphemy. God only can forgive sins, but I am God." Does He not say this?

Jones: No; He doesn't say that; He seems to say something very different.

Father O'Flanagan: He does, indeed. Now He raises the sick man at last. There he has lain before them all, his sins forgiven, but the disease not cured. Strange, his cure has been delayed, because God saw their faith! But now comes the cure as a proof that those strange words which struck the crowd with silent awe were true. "Lo!" says Our Lord, "disease is the punishment of sin. To take away sins is great, to take away sins and punishment too is greater. I will take away the punishment, that you may believe that I can even take away the sins. Both I take away as the Son of Man." The Scribes were wrong, the crowd was right. The Scribes believed not, and because they believed not, they said God only can forgive sins and God cannot forgive sins THROUGH MAN. The crowd was right which believed and which believed said, God who can work miracles through men can also forgive sins through men also. Therefore, "that ye may know that the Son of Man hath" from God "power on earth to forgive sins, Arise, take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house." Mark, Jones, was Our Lord Son of God?

Jones: Surely, He was Son of God.

Father O'Flanagan: Does He call Himself Son of God?

Jones: No, Son of Man.

Father O'Flanagan: Mark again, how He adds the words, "on EARTH." While all the crowd—learned and unlearned—listen, He is very distinct and clear. It is not the Son of God in heaven, nor even the Son of God on earth; nor the Son of Man in heaven, but it is the Son of Man on EARTH. Now mark, Jones, was it wrong to think that God alone can forgive sins?

Jones: I don't see how it can be.

Father O'Flanagan: Yet God was angry at the thought. Mark again, if the crowd thought that man by his own power could forgive sins, would that have been blasphemy?

Jones: Surely.

Father O'Flanagan: And Our Lord could not possibly have encouraged the crowd in blasphemous thoughts?

Jones: Not possibly.

Father O'Flanagan: Well! then. Our Lord could only have meant to teach that while God alone can forgive sins, yet He has been pleased to forgive sins through men, and that is what the Gospel says; "the multitude marvelled," and instead of thinking that man by his own power forgave sins, they "glorified God which had given such power unto men." Mark you, Jones, unto men—the plural, men: they did not think that God had given such power to one man alone; they did not think such power given only to a human nature joined to the Divine Person of the Son of God. They thought it given to a man amongst other men, and that what was given to one man might be given to others; nor did Our Lord contradict this idea. He saw their hearts, and let them go away thinking that He as man had forgiven the sins of men, and that God had given such power to men. Now do you doubt that Our Lord meant to teach that God had given the forgiveness of sins into His Hands AS MAN, and that His will was to forgive sins through men?

Jones: It reads so, your Reverence.

Father O'Flanagan: It does so read, indeed. God, having taken the nature of man Himself, honours the nature which He has taken, gives to that nature kingly powers, and rules the earth in that nature. As man He judges, as man He condemns, as man He forgives, as man He loves His fellow-men, and calls them into a share of His own dignities to sit with Him at the right hand of God.

Jones: There is one thing, your Reverence. I see that He forgives sins Himself as man; I should like to see more clearly that He gave that power of forgiving sins to other men.

Father O'Flanagan: Next time, Jones; for tonight we have had enough.

TALK VI: IN THE PHARISEE'S HOUSE

Father O'Flanagan: So you have brought your Bible again, Jones? Let us see where we have got to:

First. God can forgive sins through man, if He pleases.

Secondly. If He forgives sins through man, it would be like His other dealings with man.

We are now upon a third question—How did He forgive sins Himself when He was on earth? That He forgave sins by His human lips, pronouncing words of absolution, we know; and when He forgave them, did He tell those who heard Him that He was God, or did He know that they thought Him only a man, and still let them think so, and let them think that as a man He had forgiven sins? We have seen in one case, Jones, have we not, that He was angry with those who said, "God only can forgive sins," and pleased with those who glorified God for giving such power to men. We come now to another case. Open your Bible, Jones, at the 7th Chapter of St. Luke, verse 36 to the end. Have you got it?

Jones: Yes, your Reverence, I see—about St. Mary Magdalene anointing Our Lord in the house of Simon.

Father O'Flanagan: Yes! the first time. She twice anointed Our Lord's head; once was towards the end, when His death was drawing near; but this time, of which I now speak, was earlier, in the second year of His Ministry.

Mary was a great sinner, and known to be a great sinner. The public forgiveness of her sins would create a stir; public forgiveness given too in the house of a man of distinction, a wealthy man and a Pharisee, and on a public occasion when he had guests. Such an act could not be hid, and Our Lord clearly did not wish it to be hid. Not only the guests at Simon's table, but all Capharnaum, would hear of it. All Capharnaum would hear; but would Capharnaum think that He had forgiven sins as God, or that He had forgiven sins as a man, as a Prophet of God? Now, Jones, in the first place, did Simon himself think Him to be God?

Jones: I think not.

Father O'Flanagan: I am sure not. He has not made up his mind yet even that He is a Prophet. "This man," says he, "if He were a Prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman that is that toucheth Him; for she is a sinner." He has pretty nearly made up his mind that Our Lord is not a Prophet.

Jones: Besides, Father, he didn't treat Our Lord with much respect.

Father O'Flanagan: You are right, Jones; the kiss, the washing of feet, the fragrant ointment, were the common civilities shown by the wealthy to their honoured guests—but not one of these civilities had Simon shown; beyond doubt he did not think Him God; he inclined to think Him no Prophet.

But then Our Lord, in His mercy, gives him proof that He is a Prophet—by showing that He knew both Simon's thoughts and Mary's sins. "I know that she has been a sinner, but she has repented truly, and is a sinner no more; she has loved much and sorrowed deeply, therefore her sins are even now forgiven. On you, Simon, are now more sins than on her; you have not sinned so deeply, but you have not repented so truly."

Now what I want you to notice is this. Our Lord knew that Simon and the rest thought Him at most a Prophet?

Jones: Yes.

Father O'Flanagan: He knew also that Mary was thoroughly and truly repentant?

Jones: Yes.

Father O'Flanagan: And repentant from the best and truest of reasons—because of her love of God.

Jones: Yes. He says, "she loved much."

Father O'Flanagan: Therefore there would seem to have been no need for Him to pronounce words of forgiveness. He has already said her sins were forgiven (v. 47), yet He turns to her—turns from Simon and the guests to her, as she stood at His feet, and says markedly, and so as to call the attention of all, "Thy sins are forgiven." He has already seen that her sins are forgiven, yet He with human lips—with lips that no one at table thought to be the lips of God—pronounces her absolution.

Jones: I don't see it quite. Could not Our Lord have been telling her what He had already told the others, that as a matter of fact her sins were forgiven—not forgiving them exactly, but telling her that they had been forgiven.

Father O'Flanagan: Well objected, Jones. If the old woman dies, we must make you a Doctor of Divinity. But to answer it. I think it is quite clear from the Bible that Our Lord did not simply tell her that her sins had been forgiven; for "those that sat at meat with Him" clearly understood Him to have there and then forgiven; for they said within themselves, "Who is this that forgiveth sins also?" They would not have said this, if they had thought Our Lord meant simply to say that by the spirit of prophecy He knew her to be forgiven. Do you agree?

Jones: I think I do, your Reverence.

Father O'Flanagan: Well then! Our Lord saw that they looked upon Him as a Prophet, who claimed that through Himself, as through a channel, forgiveness was conveyed. He saw that; yet He says the words of absolution, and leaves them still to think on, that He as a Prophet and a Messenger of God had claimed to forgive sins. One of two things: either He must have expected them to know that He was God, or He must have been content to let them think that He forgave as God's Messenger. He could not expect them to know that He was God; for, as we have already seen, this was a special grace given to Peter, not a common grace given to all, until the coming of the Holy Ghost. Therefore He was content to let them think He was man, and that, as man, He claimed to forgive sins. If this was wrong doctrine, if the idea that God forgave sins through man was blasphemous and wrong, could our Lord have possibly permitted that idea to be produced in men's minds by His words, and to stop in their minds without an attempt to change it?

Jones: I do not think he could.

Father O'Flanagan: Then Our Lord must have meant by this public forgiveness of sins, as in the case of the palsied man, to prepare men's minds for the truth that, as God had Himself become man, He had been pleased to forgive sins Himself as man, and to convey forgiveness through His fellow men: human souls and human lips had become the channels of God's grace, since God had wedded human nature to Himself. But this we shall see more clearly, when we come to show how and when it was that our Lord, having during His lifetime conveyed the forgiveness of God to men through His Human Nature, chose His fellow men to be channels also of that same forgiveness. For to-night, Jones, I will ask you to notice but one thing more.

Jones: Yes, your Reverence; what is that?

Father O'Flanagan: Please notice, how exactly this account of St. Mary Magdalene agrees with Catholic teaching about Confession. You know by this time, Jones, what is the best and highest reason for which we should be sorry for our sins. Is it the fear of hell?

Jones: No, your Reverence; the love of God.

Father O'Flanagan: Very well; when a sinner mourns over his sins from the pure love of God, his sins are forgiven at once; mortal sin and the pure love of God cannot live together; if one comes into the heart, the other must go out. Therefore the moment love of God enters the sinner's heart, that moment the sins, without waiting for Confession, are forgiven and pass away.

Jones: Then I suppose he need not go to Confession?

Father O'Flanagan: Yes, yes, he need. That is what I wanted to make you notice. In every case Confession. True, his sins are forgiven, and if he cannot get a priest and dies unconfessed he will go to heaven; but if he can get a priest, to a priest he must go, and the priest must give him absolution; in all cases, even when Our Lord has forgiven Himself secretly in the sinner's heart, yet even then He will forgive also through the human lips of the priest. In all cases He will honour His messenger. See, then, this is Catholic doctrine. By contrition sins are forgiven; yet those forgiven sins must be brought to the priest and receive the absolution from the human lips. And this is the doctrine taught you by our passage of to-night. Of St. Mary Magdalene Our Lord says, "her sins are forgiven"; she has contrition, she has "loved much"; yet over the forgiven sins of this loving one He speaks the words of absolution. "Thy sins are forgiven." See, Jones, how in all things the Church, which is God's work, agrees with the Bible, which is God's work also. God's works cannot disagree.

TALK VII: THE GIVING OF THE GREAT GIFT

Father O'Flanagan: Glad to see you again, Jones; you must be tired of my lectures, I fear. We are nearly at an end of them now. Our last passage of Scripture is in St. John, chap. xx.

Have you found it? Now then, verses 21 to 23, read them out in your own translation, Jones, then you'll be sure it is all straightforward.

Jones: "Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.

"And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and saith unto them, receive ye the Holy Ghost.

"Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

Father O'Flanagan: That is right. Are they simple words and clear?

Jones: They seem simple and clear enough.

Father O'Flanagan: Well! they bring us to the last thing we had to attend to.

We have seen that there is nothing unlikely or unreasonable, or contrary to God's other dealings, in His forgiving sins through men if He pleased. That was step one.

We have seen that Our Lord Himself forgave sins as man, and led people to think that sins would be forgiven through men. That was step two.

Now we are at step three: did Our Lord give this power of forgiving sins to men or not?

Jones: And you find it in this passage?

Father O'Flanagan: I find it in that passage. The words are as clear as language can make them. "Whose sins ye forgive." YE, Jones; who are meant by YE?

Jones: The Apostles of course.

Father O'Flanagan: Whose sins the Apostles forgive. What about those sins, Jones?

Jones: They are forgiven.

Father O'Flanagan: Were the Apostles men, Jones?

Jones: Of course they were.

Father O'Flanagan: But different men from you and me, Jones; not children of Adam like us?

Jones: I don't see it, your Reverence.

Father O'Flanagan: But giants, Jones, weren't they? Made of other clay? They lived so long ago, you know, Jones. They were a larger race of men—like the big fossil creatures at the Crystal Palace.

Jones: Now your Reverence is chaffing me. They were men like us, of course.

Father O'Flanagan: Of course they were, Jones; men with sins, and men with faults such as we have, weak men who fell away from Our Lord on, and one of whom denied his Lord; men who loved earthly glory, and wondered who would be the greatest; ignorant men, Jones, and illiterate, poor and humble. Yet Our Lord gave them the power of forgiving sins?

Jones: It looks like it, your Reverence.

Father O'Flanagan: It would be useless saying: "Whose sins you forgive they are forgiven," if they were not to forgive anybody's sins; would it not, Jones?

Jones: Surely, your Reverence is right there.

Father O'Flanagan: Well, then, let us look more closely into the account. On what day and at what time were these words said?

Jones: On Easter Sunday, I believe, your Reverence, the very same day He rose from the dead, in the evening.

Father O'Flanagan: Yes. Not until He rose from the dead, and when He Himself was no longer to appear as a living man among the living, and when by His Crucifixion He had won from His Father that all power—even the power over sin—should be given into His Hands as man.

Jones: As man?

Father O'Flanagan: Yes, as man. As God He had all power from all eternity, had He not?

Jones: To be sure. He had of course.

Father O'Flanagan: Then it would not need to be given. His own life among living men was over, men had not willed that He should stay among them, He could not any longer stop on earth Himself and with His own human lips use the power given Him as man and forgive sins. While He was Himself on earth to forgive sins, it needed not that He should give the power to others; now He was to be no more on earth, and if through human lips at all sins were to be forgiven, it must be through the human lips of other men, not through His own. Therefore, now when His own life was over, He gives His powers to others, that others may carry them on. Even we, Jones, with our little human wisdom, would do the same. If we wished our work to go on, we should give it to our children or to our friends to do, when we could no more do it ourselves, should we not?

Jones: That is right, your Reverence.

Father O'Flanagan: Let us look now more closely into the words and see how clearly Our Lord tells them that this is His intention, His meaning, that what He had done they were to do. "Peace be to you," is the first, I forgive you Myself your sins;—your cowardice at the Cross, your denial of Me,

the wavering of your faith, your desertion of My Mother, all is pardoned. "Peace be to you." But I will do more than pardon, "As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you." What I have been on the earth, that you are to be. "As My Father hath sent Me." How did His Father send Him, and for what? Armed in His human nature with all the power of heaven, with power to teach without chance of error, with power to interpret Scripture to the full, with power to give grace, with power to work miracles, with power to speak that MUST be heard, with power to offer sacrifice, with power to forgive sin—so His Father sent Him—"even so send I you." Power also shall be yours to teach unerring, to interpret, to pray, to offer sacrifice, to forgive sin, and, therefore, now, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost." And, lest there be doubt of what He means, He gives to His words a solemn action which He had never used to them before: He breathed His breath—the breath of the risen God—upon them, the token of the Holy Spirit, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost." When He so said, Jones, did they receive the Holy Ghost, or were the words of God empty, and did His breath return to Him void?

Jones: Surely they must have received Him. God does not speak in vain.

Father O'Flanagan: And for what purpose did they receive Him? If we are to be simple in explaining the language of God, if we are not to twist and torture God's words, as we should never dream of torturing the words of man, they must have received the Holy Ghost that they might have power to do that which Our Lord says they should do in the words that follow—"Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them." This is the clear plain meaning of the words. We have seen that there is nothing in that meaning which is strange or contrary to God's dealings with man, or against God's love, or beyond God's power; therefore there is no reason for putting aside the plain meaning—and the Church has never seen reason for putting it aside, and has always said that this plain meaning is the true one.

And for what other reason would they receive the Holy Ghost? For their own holiness they had already received Him; they had not been with the Sacred Heart so long and not received of Its holiness; their still further holiness, and all the abundance of the Holy Spirit's gifts, they were to receive on Whit-Sunday. Our Lord did not give now what He had already given in Baptism; nor did He give now what was to be given at Pentecost; yet surely He gave now something—and what was that something but a gift, not of holiness only, and not for the sake of the Apostles only, but a gift for the sake of all men and all times—this great gift, "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them."

Thus, Jones, Our Lord's words and actions have all, at His first appearance to His Apostles, one clear, simple, connected meaning. He comes for a special reason: that reason is to give to them powers which would show them at once that His death was not a defeat, but a victory; that His work was still to go on; and that, cowardly and weak as they had been, they were restored to His favour, and were to be the instruments by whom His work was to be carried on. And this purpose for which He came He carries out by His words. He sends them on the same message on which His Father had sent Him—and armed with the same powers. That they might have those powers He bids them receive the Holy Ghost, and as the principal part of the work He bids them forgive sins, and tells them that whom they forgive on earth, He forgives above, and that His pardon is conveyed through them.

And so, Jones, He completed the gift which He began at the Last Supper. Then He gave them power as Priests to go on without ceasing one part of His work—the worship of His Father by offering continual sacrifice of His death in the Holy Mass.

The worship of His Father—for that He provides first, even before He dies.

The forgiveness of man—for this He provides next, on the very day of His rising.

And those two things are the things for which His Father sent Him—the worship of God and the pardon of man.

Now, Jones, do you believe that Our Lord could have forgiven sins through man?

Jones: I do.

Father O'Flanagan: That he forgave sins Himself as man when living among men?

Jones: I do.

Father O'Flanagan: That lastly He gave the power He used as man to His fellow-men on Easter Sunday?

Jones: Yes; I think your Reverence is right there too.

Father O'Flanagan: Then get you gone, Jones, and ask the old woman to teach you how to examine your conscience.

Jones: I can do that for myself, thank your Reverence. I shouldn't fancy confessing to the old woman, much as I like her. I will come on Monday; but I shall have a word or two to say before I kneel down.

Father O'Flanagan: Why! what's the matter now?

Jones: Well! I believe in it, you know, and all that; but still I'm not used to it, and it seems so funny like. However, good night, your Reverence.

TALK VIII: PUTTING IT OFF

Father O'Flanagan: Why, man! you don't look as if you came quite willingly. You are like the rest of us. You don't quite like it.

Jones: I don't, your Reverence, asking pardon for making so bold, it seems so queer.

Father O'Flanagan: Well! let's see if I can find out what's the matter. To begin with, you know a Priest can't tell?

Jones: So the old woman says. I shouldn't think he could.

Father O'Flanagan: Aye! but you don't feel quite sure for all that, eh? Not quite, quite sure.

Jones: I think I do, your Reverence; still, telling a man all you've done and said and thought, for the first time, it does seem strange.

Father O'Flanagan: Let me try and make you easier then. To go back to our old likeness of the pen, which is God's hand, when He scratches out the sins. When you wrote that letter of yours, you know, asking the old woman if she would be your wife, you didn't want everybody to see the letter?

Jones: Indeed no, your Reverence.

Father O'Flanagan: Nobody knew the secret but you and the pen! You were not afraid of the pen's telling anybody.

Jones: Your Reverence jokes. Of course not; how could the pen either know it or speak it?

Father O'Flanagan: Why! the pen wrote it! Now, Jones, that is just the likeness of the Priest. He is blind, deaf and dumb as the pen. He neither knows your sins, nor can tell them. While God uses him as a pen indeed, he acts as God's pen; but when God has laid him down, he has no more to do with the sins he has just heard than the pen with the words it has just written.

Jones: Do you mean that he has actually forgotten them?

Father O'Flanagan: No, he could remember them if he chose. I do not mean that God works a miracle, and bolts the confession supernaturally out of his mind. But if he remembers them, he knows so thoroughly that he has no longer anything to do with them, that it is just as if he had never heard them at all. To tell them would be the most terrible of sins. He dare not speak of them even to yourself, except in the Confessional again. He dare not show, even by a look, that he knows any sins he has heard. Because you have told him something dreadful he does not therefore wear a look of horror; he does not shrink from you, or sigh, or look gloomy—because he actually does not know your sins.

Jones: Not know them?

Father O'Flanagan: As a Priest he knows them; but not as a man. As God's pen, as God's messenger, he knows them; as your fellow-man, Mr. O'Flanagan, he does not know them. In the Confessional he knows them; out of the Confessional he knows nothing about them; knowing, he still knows not. Now I will take a hard case. We will say that you are my dearest friend, I have known you for years, we have been as brothers, we have sat together at table; you come to me at Confession, and tell me that you are a murderer. I know by what you say that it was my own mother that you murdered. You are repentant, and I give you absolution. We leave the Confessional, and till you die never by word or sign can I show to you that I know you to be my mother's murderer. I cannot put you from my table, nor wear the look of coldness, nor refuse to press the hand stained with my mother's blood. Nay! I cannot even think the ill thought of you. You are a repentant forgiven sinner, of whose sins, which God has blotted out, I know nothing, not have ever known anything. Nay! you are not repentant, you defend and excuse the murder, and I cannot absolve you; yet am I still to you as I was before, and of your sin I know nothing, nor have ever known anything. There could not be a harder case than that, Jones, I think, to a man who loved his mother.

Jones: There could not, your Reverence—and you couldn't speak a word of it?

Father O'Flanagan: He couldn't look a word of it, Jones. He must be just as he was before, eating with his mother's murderer, caressing his mother's murderer, walking with his mother's murderer, to whom he had himself conveyed God's pardon, and secured the salvation of his soul.

Jones: Horrible!

Father O'Flanagan: Beautiful! so much stronger is the charity of heaven than the love of earth. But now let us go a little more into the everyday common sense of the matter. Are there not others to whom secrets are told as well as priests?

Jones: I suppose there are.

Father O'Flanagan: Aye! and unpleasant secrets too. Many a husband has an odd thing or two to tell his wife before the marriage day, or just after it, as the case may be; and many a wife has an odd thing or two to tell her husband; but neither fears that the other will tell. And the doctor! Truly I think he hears as many confessions as the Priest, and uglier confessions, too, I fancy. Confessions not willingly told, but wrung out of the culprit, or confessions not necessary to be told, but there written for him to read. Yet who dreams that he will tell? Then the lawyer! The murderer there in the condemned cell has told him of his guilt. Does he straightway go and blab it out before the court? No, no, no. Why! not a man in all the big world who is not this moment keeping the secret of some strange confession. Yet the world trusts and is content, and never dreams that they will tell! Mere natural honour—the honour of friend or the natural love of relation, or mere professional honour, the honour of physician or of judge—to this they trust, but the honour that is beyond nature, the honour that is strong with God's grace, this they trust not in—pretend to trust it not.

Jones: Does God then give grace?

Father O'Flanagan: Surely. God does not lay burdens on men without giving strength to bear them. The heavenly power to keep the secrets of the Confessional is part of the Sacrament of Order. When the power to forgive is given, the power to hide sins in secrecy is wrapped up in it. So that, Jones, as a matter of fact, never has it been known since the Church began that any Priest has ever told a secret whispered in confession. There have been bad priests since the Church began, priests who have sinned all manner of sins, who have been untrue to their vows, who have lost the Faith, who have left the Church; but not one even of them, let him have been ever so vile and bad, has committed that meanest and vilest of sins—the breaking of his honour to God by telling the secret of the Confessional. Did you ever hear of St. John Nepomucene?

Jones: St. John who?

Father O'Flanagan: St. John Nepomucene. St. John who was born at a little place in Bohemia rejoicing in the name of Nepomuc.

Jones: The old woman is as full of saints, I sometimes tell her, as our puppy is, asking your Reverence's pardon, of fleas, but I don't think I ever heard her tell of that one.

Father O'Flanagan: Well! before I tell you of him, let me say one thing more on the common sense of the matter. You think of me, I fancy, as liking to hear confessions, rather enjoying the Confessional. Heavens! I wish I could put you into my confessional for half-an-hour. It may be unpleasant to make a confession, it is a thousand times worse to hear one. Of all dreary weary jobs I know none drearier and wearier. Scores and hundreds of human beings coming and telling you the same stale old human sins, the same weary old human weaknesses, too much drink, and too little prayer, the same old changes rung on the same old seven deadly sins week after week, month after month, year after year, the same resolutions broken, and made and broken again—mercy! it is like living in a churchyard, bones and skulls and skulls and bones, save that in the Confessional the bones and skulls come to life again and the dead souls arise. But do you think, Jones, that when a man has been six hours in the Confessional, or even one hour, hearing the same old dreary tale from

mouth after mouth—do you think that he cares to remember what he hears—or could remember if he chose—or cares to do anything except to get out of that prison-house to his supper or his bed? Talk of charity! no visiting the hospitals, no going to the prisoner, is one-millionth part of the charity which is in tending the sick soul in the Confessional, and stopping—charity's prisoner—in that weary little wooden box; St. Philip Neri's Hospital, that Confessional he loved so much, is the true Hospital after all.

Jones: Well! your Reverence; about St. John with the odd name—Nep—something or other.

Father O'Flanagan: Nepomucene. I'll tell you. Some 500 years ago, there was a certain King of Bohemia and Emperor of Germany named Wenceslas—an unhappy lad who had the ill chance to become King and Emperor at sixteen years of age. The poor lad lived, as one might have feared, a most evil life, and earned for himself the unpleasant nicknames of sluggard and drunkard; and he deserved them; he was little better than a brute every way, violent and savage in his temper as a madman. His Empress was as good as he was bad; his violence made her a Saint; her holiness enraged him and made him still more the brute; for all that he was dotingly fond of her with a wild sort of savage fondness. The Empress made her confessions to our St. John, a learned and holy man, a magnificent preacher, and almoner for the Royal pair. Amongst other fancies it struck the good King Wenceslas that he would like to know what his Empress said in Confession to St. John. Of course no one would say him nay! so he called St. John and bade him tell the tale as it was told to him. What the Empress said he must know. St. John made the answer which every priest must have made; Confessions were made to God, not to him as man, and the secrets told to God he could not reveal.

A day or two after Wenceslas' dinner was not to his liking. A fowl served to his majesty's palate was over-roasted or under-roasted, or something was the matter with the roast. Thereon Wenceslas, like a madman, gave orders that the cook who could not roast should be roasted himself; and the poor wretch was spitted and roasting before they knew. Then St. John ran into the Emperor and threw himself down, and asked for mercy; he himself was thrown into prison, not to go thence till he had told the confession of the Empress.

Every effort was made by the Emperor: prison had not opened St. John's mouth, perhaps coaxing would: a magnificent feast—and St. John called out of prison to sit at the board of the Emperor entreating and persuading; but St. John speaks not.

Then more tortures, rack, burning torches, roasting—still no word from his lips but the names of Our Lord and His Mother.

Again released, and apparently in favour. Yet did the lion only slumber. One day as Wenceslas looked from his window he saw John pass. The madness came upon him, "Follow him," he cried, "bind him, and throw him bound into the river." And so bound, but with his secret safe, he was thrown into the river.

And lo! a light upon the river and all Prague gathered to see! On the water, floating calmly quietly on its bosom, the body of the saint; and round it shone the glory of God. And 330 years after they opened his tomb; the bones perfect, but the flesh consumed: only not consumed, but fresh as in life, the Tongue which told not the sins of the penitent, which held fast the secret whispered to God.

Jones: A wondrous tale, your Reverence, and a holy man. And would all Priests do as he?

Father O'Flanagan: By the blessing of God, all.

TALK IX: AT LAST

Father O'Flanagan: Any more objections, Jones?

Jones: I don't like it, Father; it feels so queer, and I feel ashamed like. I can't tell you all I've done.

Father O'Flanagan: Rubbish! Jones, I don't want you to tell me. By-and-bye when I sit down in that chair, and you kneel before God and His holy saints and angels, you will whisper it all to God, and God's messenger, but you will forget all about me. Think of God and tell it all to God. I am lost, I am nobody, only God's instrument; no longer the Father O'Flanagan whom you have known so long, and who has talked and joked and eaten with you, but simply God's instrument, lost as it were in Him. Forget me and remember God. Make God a presence real to you, feel Him, see Him; and then as He already knows all about your sins, why fear to tell Him that which He saw you think and do, and heard you speak? But then again, Jones, do you think I've never heard any confession besides your own?

Jones: Of course you have, your Reverence, hundreds.

Father O'Flanagan: Hundreds! aye thousands. Then you speak in confession to one who has heard all the vices and sins that poor human nature can be guilty of, one to whom nothing can be startling, and who, whatever you may have been or done, has heard the like before, not once or twice, but many times. In truth men are men, their humanity the same, their temptations pretty much the same, the same flesh and the same world and the same devil ever at them; and your tale, if it be not quite the same, is yet probably very much the same as that of hundreds who are kneeling in the Confessional the world over this minute, and of millions upon millions who have kneeled in confession since St. John Baptist's penitents confessed their sins.

Then again, Jones, the priest in the Confessional is bound to be sweet and gentle to you; he represents in the Confessional the Mercy of God,—true the Justice also, but the Justice made captive by the Mercy, and compelled to be almost unjust to itself. He is there to pardon, to give the seventy times seven pardons, and he then is likest to the Sacred Heart which was sent, "to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised." Oh! mercy of mercies! there is no work of mercy like the Confessional. One absolution is worth all the sorrows and the trials of a priest's life:—but there, you are staring at me; I didn't mean to burst out like that.

And the priest is bound to be all the more sweet and gentle to you, because he who represents God's mercy needs that mercy himself, because he who forgives sin is himself a sinner. Men feel it as an objection that they should confess sins to a fellow-sinner. I know not—it seems to me that it is one of God's mercies that He has chosen our fellow-sinners to hear us: to tell our sins to an angel, to one of spotless purity, yet a creature, and full of jealous love for the honour of His Creator, would be to me a terrible thing: but to tell one's sins to one who is hedged about with temptations like to my own is an easy thing. He is not one who cannot feel for our infirmities, but one who is in all respects tempted as we are: sweet certainly and gentle and most tender, as he hopes for mercy himself, must he be to others.

Jones: Your Reverence does not mean to say that there is no shame in telling your sins in confession?

Father O'Flanagan: No. Of course there is some shame, but I mean that the devil makes the shame appear ten thousand times greater than it is. The devil, of course, hates the Confessional. He would rather do anything than let you go in there. You know in the Gospels how he disliked losing the people whom he possessed, how he raged and tore the poor wretch, and hurled him on the ground. Well! it is in the Confessional that he has to leave the poor souls he possesses, and he does not like it. A few whispered words, and his power is gone; and his sceptre broken, and he is uncrowned and driven from his kingdom; he does not like it, and so he raises any barrier that may keep you from the Confessional. One of his chief barriers is shame. Well! you must strike him there and cast off this shame. For remember a sinner has no right to have his sins to be forgiven without shame and without pain. If, through the grace of baptism we choose to fall again, what right have we to complain of a little shame and a little pain. Truly it is a little; the mercy of Our Lord has put upon us the lightest of disgrace and punishment; to whisper our sins to a fellow-sinner, who cannot tell and dare not be hard upon us, is surely amongst shames the least and lightest. If we choose not this shame, then indeed there is shame in store for us on the last day, the great Day of Judgment. Before the whole court of heaven and earth and hell your sins stand out plain and clear for all creation to see, the more shameful, the more you have concealed them here; the more shameful, the more you have shrunk cowardly from laying them open in the Confessional.

Jones: Well! your Reverence, I see all that; it's right enough that we should be put to shame a little. We put Our Lord to shame enough by our sin. But I don't think it's exactly the shame. I don't know that I've been such a bad man,—foolish enough, and thoughtless a bit when I was younger, as young chaps are, but never given to swearing much or drinking, or anything of that;—but I feel shy like about it, it seems so odd; I shan't know what to say.

Father O'Flanagan: Ah! that's what half of them say. You're awkward about it! Of course you are, poor fellow; not like a Catholic brought up to it from his childhood. Oh! well! leave it to me, I'll soon put it right for you. At your first confession you'll just let me ask you questions, you'll not have much more to say than yes or no to them, and before you know where you are you'll have got rid of the burden of your whole life, all your sins gone for ever, and you a ten times happier and better man for their going.

Jones: Well! your Reverence, I suppose I must. Will that be all then? Will that make me a Catholic?

Father O'Flanagan: Not quite all. You were christened when you were a baby?

Jones: I believe so, at the old Protestant church at home. Do you christen me again?

Father O'Flanagan: I do, and I don't. That puzzles you. Well; you know that anyone can baptize, Catholic, Protestant, heathen, adult or child, anyone can baptize; it would be the duty of every one to baptize, if a child was dying; no one but a priest ought to baptize except in such case of necessity; but if anyone else chooses to do it, the baptism he gives is as good a baptism as the priest can give, and will open the gates of heaven to the child as much as the priest can.

Jones: Yes, your Reverence, so I've heard the old woman say.

Father O'Flanagan: A Protestant clergyman has no right to baptize; but if he chooses to do it, and does it properly, his baptism is a good one, and therefore you would not want to be baptized by me. But very often Protestant clergymen do not baptize properly, either from ignorance or from carelessness, I myself have seen even High-Church clergymen, who are the most careful, baptize in such way that no baptism was given.

Jones: It is an easy thing to do, your Reverence, surely; I shouldn't have thought they could make a mistake.

Father O'Flanagan: It is easy, it only wants simple water flowing on the skin, and a few words said at the same time. But sometimes they have not used simple water, and sometimes they have baptized in a batch, and sprinkled a lot of babies together at hap-hazard, and sometimes they have used a wet finger, and sometimes they have thrown water on the woolly hair of a boy and not a drop has touched the skin, and sometimes they have not said the words at the time at which they poured the water. Half of them, you see, do not really believe in Baptism. So we cannot tell if the clergyman who baptized you, baptized you properly or not. Now you know a person can only be baptized once; so when it is doubtful if a person has been rightly baptized or not, we give what is called conditional baptism, we say, "If thou art not baptized, I baptize thee," and so on.

Jones: Then which do you do first? Baptize or absolve me?

Father O'Flanagan: First you make your confession; then I will baptize you, and then I will give you absolution. You do not know an "Act of Contrition?"

Jones: Act of Contrition? What is that, your Reverence?

Father O'Flanagan: A form of words, in which you tell God that you are sorry for your sins, and with your understanding and your will put away sin from you, put away your past sins and resolve to do them no more. When you have made your confession, you shall make the act of contrition with me. Here is a short and easy one: "O my God, I am very sorry that I have sinned against Thee, because Thou art so good, and I will not sin again."

Jones: Do you give me a name at baptism?

Father O'Flanagan: Yes, you may take another name if you like, it should be the name of course of some Saint, a real Christian name.

Jones: I should like to have taken the name of Our Blessed Lady, only I am a man.

Father O'Flanagan: You can do so if you like; many men in Catholic countries are called Mary in addition to some other name.

Jones: Then give me the name of Mary, there is none like it. And now, Father, I am ready.

CONCLUSION

Father O'Flanagan: You are tired, Jones, I see; but you are all the happier for your confession?

Jones: Happy! God bless your Reverence!—I cannot speak much;—I am another man, and it is another life:—Thank God, thank God!
