

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

A Bit Of A Mess

When Catholics used to celebrate the Sacrament of Forgiveness very frequently, they were also used to looking for their faults, and good at identifying them, and calling them by their proper name. If you believe that you will find forgiveness, you can accept your sins much more readily. Now that they seldom go to confession, a lot of people are unused even to knowing their shortcomings. They find it harder and harder to admit they sometimes fall short of the glory of God, and consequently they find they need to defend themselves vigorously against criticism, even where they are manifestly in the wrong. Deprived of the constant, personal assurance of forgiveness, we may find ourselves calling black white, in order to restore our flagging self-respect. I'm hearing a lot of people saying that they are losing it.

For Instance, Chastity's Out

I'm astonished at the abolition of chastity even within the household of the faith. Young people have grown up in a world where sex has been so totally separated from the begetting of children and the building of family that it is seen as a leisure activity to be arranged with anyone who happens to be willing. Few seem seriously to question this attitude, which is simply the attitude of the pagan world around us. Middle-aged parents shrug their shoulders and talk about times having changed; I've even been told how delighted they are at the birth of an occasional child to their unmarried daughters. People cheerfully turn up asking for baptism for their children quite without any reference to the fact that they are unmarried and see no need to change in this regard. Have they really forgotten all about Christian marriage, about the sanctity of sexual love, and about the extreme danger of bringing up children without the security that comes from their parents' sincere promises of lifelong fidelity? Half of them have, of course, divorced parents, which can't invite them to trust such promises. Most of them don't practice Christian faith, which robs them of the language of Christian love. But the speed with which these attitudes have become established has been breathtaking. It's a tsunami of paganism. But it isn't the only area. Stealing and lying have crept into our lives at many levels, and we come across homes where they are sadly the norm,

expected by and in all family members. Violence and verbal abuse set the common tone of life in some homes, and respect for age, parenthood, and any authority is unknown in many people's lives. I'm discovering situations where youngsters in their middle teens have already lost touch with their parents and are effectively left to make their own way in the world.

It's Not About Hypocrisy

Catholics used to be accused of hypocrisy in confessing their sins. *You can do what you like, people sneered, and the priest will tell you you're all right, and then you can do it some more.* That isn't at all what it's about; in fact it works in quite the opposite direction. The assurance of forgiveness gives reality to our faith in God (who does indeed promise to forgive us). Frequent confession used to take from us the awful business of needing to justify ourselves: it made it possible for us to be honest, not in denial. It also meant that it was in our religion that we were at our most open and sincere. The presence of a listening priest somehow made this realistic; having to tell the truth to another human being helps us not to take refuge in self-deception. Take away that element of openness before God, and we're back in the impossible business of balancing our own books, proving our own value, deserving our own place in the world. This is a pointless and endless task; not one of us deserves life or eternal hope. So we deteriorate further, and tell ourselves we are at least better than the man next door, or at least better than the woman whose life has been splashed across the tabloid newspapers. This is a very poor substitute for divine forgiveness and reconciliation, not earned or deserved, but gained by humility, self-knowledge and repentance.

Keeping Our Ideals

Ideals are not the same thing as facts. We're allowed to fall short of our ideals, but still to hold them sacred. It isn't hypocritical to hope to be better than we are. Jesus comes to help us in our *weakness*, not our strength: it is the sick who need the doctor. The only sick that a doctor cannot help are the ones who will not accept that they are ill. Let no Catholic ever be counted among them. Our self-respect must not depend on any lie. *Fr Philip*