



## Pierre Favre on the mercy of God

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In 1544, one of the founding members of the Society of Jesus wrote a letter to a fellow Jesuit on the subject of hearing confessions, and nearly 500 years later Thomas Flowers SJ finds that the letter in question still speaks eloquently about God's mercy. What does the person-centred approach to confession that St Pierre Favre elucidates in his letter reveal about the God to whom he was introduced by St Ignatius Loyola, and the grace that God offers through the sacrament of confession?

St Pierre Favre (1506-1546) came to see his battle with scruples as an occasion for the mercy of God. As a young man, guilt overwhelmed him. He worried not only over every actual and possible sin, but over whether he had confessed properly the sins he had brought to the sacrament of confession; perhaps he had forgotten a sin or neglected some detail and thus not actually

been absolved by the priest. Yet in the spiritual diary he kept between 1542 and 1546, when he reflected on his most torturously scrupulous moments, he gave thanks. In words addressed to his own soul, he marvelled that 'without those scruples Iñigo perchance might not have been able to get through to you, nor you to desire his help as happened later on.'<sup>1</sup> The 'Iñigo' to whom he refers is St Ignatius of Loyola, who became his roommate and companion at the University of Paris in 1529, and whose spiritual guidance transformed Favre's life interiorly and exteriorly. Ignatius gave him 'an understanding of my conscience and of the temptations and scruples I had had for so long without either understanding them or seeing the way by which I would be able to get peace.'<sup>2</sup> The friendship of Ignatius and Favre was the first step in forming the group of companions who would become the founding members of the Society of Jesus. That friendship was rooted in the peace of God to which Ignatius led Favre through spiritual counsel and the Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius helped Favre to know the



St Ignatius Loyola (left) & St Pierre Favre (Photo by Roy Sebastian SJ of a painting by Bronislaw Podsiady SJ)

mercy of God for which he had longed his whole life, and Favre spent the rest of his life preaching that mercy to all whom he served.

Such mercy speaks as eloquently to our own era as it did when Favre proclaimed it in the sixteenth century. A persistent temptation to believe that we presume too much in our constant cries for God's forgiveness dogs the

spiritual progress of so many Christians in every age. We listen to Jesus's words in the gospel that call us to 'be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' and we consider such evangelical challenges as to 'love your enemies' and to stop judging 'so that you may not be judged', and we all too easily feel inadequate, unsuited to the Christian life.<sup>3</sup> Yet what Favre learned so powerfully through his conversations with Ignatius and through the sort of prayer Ignatius taught him to pray was that our God is not a God of ideas and ideals, but a personal God concerned with persons. If we fixate on rules of life by which we hope to attain moral perfection without recognising that Christ's call to conversion is always a call filled with care and concern for our weakness and wellbeing, then we miss the opportunity to encounter the God who gave Pierre Favre peace. The God to whom Ignatius introduced Favre was one whose love could transform even the worst harm Favre did to himself into an occasion for grace.

At the heart of the gratitude Favre expressed for his scruples lies a nuanced understanding of divine providence. Favre did not believe that God had made him scrupulous so that God could lead him to Ignatius and show him mercy. Such a view of God's providence would be profoundly unchristian, for it would attribute something that causes us harm – the scruples that torment us and make us think we have sinned when we have not – to our all-loving God. Indeed, in the same section of his spiritual diary, Favre bewilderingly writes of 'some scruples and remorse of conscience by which the demon began to drive you to seek your Creator.'<sup>4</sup> Favre does not believe that God sent either his scruples or a demon to lead him to God. Rather, schooled in the Spiritual Exercises, Favre was convinced that God uses all possible means to labour for our good. This is because all things 'on the face of the earth are created for human beings, to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created', and God 'works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth.'<sup>5</sup> God made his mercy manifest to Favre in the way he utilised every possible means, even Favre's own scruples, to lead and care for him.

These are the convictions that grounded Favre as a confessor. Favre's renown as both a director of the Exercises and a confessor was already solidly established in 1544 when he wrote a letter to fellow Jesuit Cornelius Wischaven, counselling him on the art of hearing confessions.<sup>6</sup> Composed only a few years before Favre died at the age of forty, it is Favre's master text not only on confession, but on the mercy of God. For Favre, the sacramental encounter in confession created a privileged occasion to immerse the penitent in the mercy of God. In confession, the fragility of the penitent met the healing embrace of God, whose personal care Favre prayed would be made manifest in the tenderness of the confessor.

Such tenderness reveals itself immediately in the welcome Favre proposed a confessor ought to give to his penitent. Favre wanted a penitent to be at ease, and so allowed that someone previous-

sly unknown to the confessor should by all means 'make his confession in his own way, following the usual procedure of going through the commandments, the deadly sins, the five senses, and so on.'<sup>7</sup> A traditional approach to the sacrament had considerable merit if it felt familiar and comfortable to the penitent. But Favre did not regard this as the best possible way to begin a confession, suggesting rather that one should 'start off by accusing himself of what he himself considers his worst sin' because 'almost everyone is conscious of being weighed down by one sin more than others.'<sup>8</sup> One's worst sin need not be one's gravest sin, for the criterion Favre here proposes is entirely subjective: the sin with which Favre hopes penitents might begin confession is the one that weighs them down most heavily, the one that bothers and disturbs them most.

The point is not to disregard the gravity of sins, but rather to begin where the burden is greatest. For Favre saw the sacrament as serving not only to reconcile sinners to God and the Church, but to lift the weight that sin imposes upon us and to set sinners on the road to a life of greater freedom and fulfilment. It was not enough for a confessor to identify sins and evaluate the contrition of the penitent so as to determine appropriate penance and give absolution; Favre wanted the confessor to help sinners to free themselves from the morass of sin and to establish new habits rooted in God's grace. Thus, 'the causes and occasions of their sins should be examined', not merely to determine gravity and culpability, but 'with a view to their removal.'<sup>9</sup> Knowing why sinners fell into the sin that particularly plagued them, a confessor could offer counsel for how to avoid those occasions, and yet more significantly propose virtuous habits to replace the habits of vice.<sup>10</sup> It was essential that the confessor 'give your penances not just with a view to their making satisfaction for their previous life but also to their improving their lives in the future.'<sup>11</sup>

Favre had been a pious youth. As such, he undoubtedly already followed the established custom of the Church and confessed his sins at

least annually when he first encountered Ignatius in Paris. But he knew personally that absolution from one's sins did not always grant peace. The grip of one's sinful tendencies could make even the sublime gift of God's grace offered in the sacrament seem distant, as Favre knew from his own doubts about the completeness of his confessions. And so Favre believed that a confessor needed to do more than absolve: a confessor needed to console. A confessor needed to console because consolation is the primary language with which God reveals himself to us. Favre had learned that from Ignatius and the Exercises. He had learned that left to ourselves, too many of us excel at devising new ways to torment ourselves, supposing that our sinfulness is too great to be truly pardonable. But Favre knew that God's mercy knows no such limits.

Favre believed that with help, people could begin to see how God worked amid even their sinfulness. This was why Favre desired that a penitent should 'look into himself and state his own sins without fear and without any intimidation stemming from your words.'<sup>12</sup> There was no reason to fear sin when brought into the sacrament: for in confession, by God's grace, past sins became places of encounter and transformation. The confessor therefore needed to keep ever in mind that his presence embodied the presence of the God who forgave, who transformed, who consoled; there was no room for 'intimidation' in such an encounter. Rather, 'we must make sure that no sinner is ever made to feel bad in the very place where he came for the sole purpose of being examined, instructed, and judged by us, to whom he has come as the representative of the gentle Christ.'<sup>13</sup> Favre acknowledges the traditional role of the confessor as one who 'judged' the culpability and contrition of the penitent. But such judgment ultimately belongs not to the confessor, but to 'the gentle Christ' whom the confessor represented, and that judgment ought not to make a sinner 'feel bad.' Confession is a place for a sinner to feel good, to feel burdens lift, to feel certain of Christ's gentle consolation.

This is why 'so far as we can, we should never let a person leave us who would not willingly come back.'<sup>14</sup> It is perhaps the most telling line in the entirety of Favre's instruction. Encompassed in these words is the very personal encounter Favre envisioned taking place in the sacrament of confession. He wanted the penitent to feel cared for, to remember with fondness the person who represented Christ in his gentleness. Favre does not shrink from the seriousness of the task in confession: he acknowledges the wiles of sin and proposes specific strategies to uncover the full extent of the hidden habits of sin. But sin never becomes the centre of Favre's concern because Favre had come to know that sin never is centre of God's concern. The seriousness of sin has less to do with which commandments, laws or rules are violated, and more with the harm sin inflicts, the burdens it creates. Commandments, laws and rules exist to help us not to inflict harm and not to create burden. God is concerned with persons. Favre came to know this as God's consolation broke the grip his scruples had upon him. And he spent the rest of his life helping others to know the same gentle care God lavished upon him.

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Padberg SJ (ed.) and Martin E. Palmer SJ & Edmond C. Murphy SJ (trans.), *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre* (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), p. 63 (§6).

<sup>2</sup> *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, p. 65 (§9).

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:48; 5:43; 7:1 (NRSV [Anglicized version]).

<sup>4</sup> *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, p. 63 (§6).

<sup>5</sup> George E. Ganss SJ (ed. & trans.), *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), p. 32 (§23) & p. 95 (§236).

<sup>6</sup> *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, pp. 356-361.

<sup>7</sup> *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, p. 356.

<sup>8</sup> *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, p. 356.

<sup>9</sup> *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, p. 357.

<sup>10</sup> *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, pp. 357-358.

<sup>11</sup> *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, p. 359.

<sup>12</sup> *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, p. 356.

<sup>13</sup> *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, p. 360.

<sup>14</sup> *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, p. 360.