



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for Lent II (1st March) 2026

During the hey-day of the Church of England's Catholic Revival in the first half of the twentieth century, there was a flourish of publications containing a programme of Catholic minded devotion. If used consistently, they would have developed in the user a habit of piety in the good sense of prayer and Christian life.

Many of them contained a section on making one's confession; and some these furnished lists of possible sins that one might confess. It depends on one's perspectives as to whether you might feel that all the questions have stood the test of time; but more significantly, they were composed before the Second Vatican Council and a shift in understanding about the nature of the Confessional. Whilst you may feel that this is a matter for those who include the Sacrament in their religious observance, in fact, its implications extend into the general understanding of Christian discipleship.

Prior to the 1960s, the confessional was viewed very much by analogy as a court of criminal law where the penitents indicted themselves and plead guilty and the priest, as a quasi judge, passed sentence. From about the sixth century, books called *Penitentials* were produced matching penances to the sins - they were an early instance of sentencing guidelines. In this dispensation, obedience to the Church's laws and rules was, if not the pre-eminent Christian virtue, was the main guide to assessing the quality of our lives.

Bishop Martin, of blessed memory, was wont to observe to me that rules are for the guidance of wise men and the obedience of fools - and not only in response to some proposition I had put to him. This dictum furnishes us with a way of understanding the shift in the understanding of how we develop our Christian life; and there are two reasons why this is the case.

First, as Chinese jurists of former generations often observed, general rules and laws are blunt instruments, which are not always equal to the infinite range of circumstances in which an action or omission might occur: a choice which far from desirable might, all the same, be the best option in a particular set of circumstances.

Secondly, generalised rules do not - cannot - cover every decision that we must make; but it is not the case that any circumstance where the Church has not come to an opinion is a morally neutral zone.

It is in these situations that we can understand why rules are for guidance rather than obedience. Interrogating the guidance that they offer opens to us the principles on which they are based and takes us more deeply into the character of Christian life. Of course, such an endeavour places on us a heavier responsibility than simple obedience: we have to think about our Faith and understand how it applies to the specifics of our daily lives.

In turn, this shifts the responsibility for our lives back towards ourselves, since we have to reflect on the sorts of people we should aspire to be. In place of unquestioning obedience, which puts the responsibility on the obeyed to get the rules right, we find ourselves responsible for our choices and actions, not because someone else has told us what is right, but because we have worked this out for ourselves.

Never-the-less, this does not presage a moral free-for-all. There is a body of Christian doctrine, *Traditio* and Canon Law, which represents generations of reflexion on many of the issues, which confront human endeavour; and these are not lightly set aside. Although the choices we must make sometimes touch on private matters, the people we shape ourselves to be - even in private - necessarily live in relation to the other members of the Church; and the decisions made by an individual affects the life and character of the Church as a whole: and a responsibility to the Christian community is intrinsic to Christian discipleship.