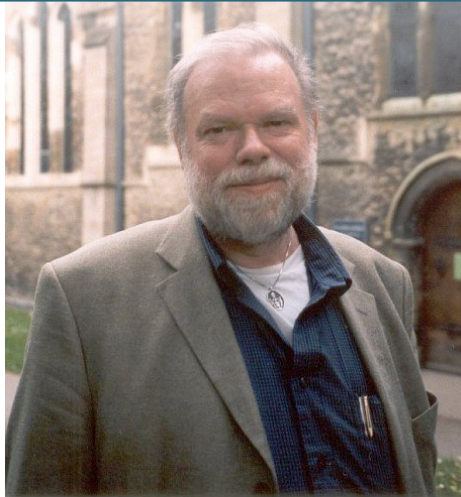


CONFESSION IN AN AGE OF SELF-ESTEEM

Among the hottest best sellers of the 1970s was a book that had the catchy title, *I'm Okay, You're Okay*. The book's message was simple: To love others starting with loving yourself, and loving yourself meant acquiring self-esteem. *I'm Okay, You're Okay* was one of the pioneering books in launching the self-esteem movement in America which has gone on to produce a Niagara Falls of books, magazine articles and television shows that remind us that, to the extent that we lack self-esteem, we are unhappy, our marriages doomed, our careers stunted, while a society whose citizens are blessed with high levels of self-esteem will be more stable, more prosperous, and less troubled with anti-social or criminal behavior. In 1986 the California State Legislature created the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility.

Unfortunately recent studies in America and other countries suggest that self-esteem isn't delivering on its promises. "A preoccupation with self-esteem may be inevitable in a society where self-worth is often defined by a diploma from Harvard, a size 4 dress or a mansion in Southampton," commented New York Times journalist Erica Goode. She noted that one of the findings of recent self-esteem studies is that criminals often have more self-esteem than people who are not a danger to their neighbors. One of the researchers she quoted, Dr. Jennifer Crocker, a psychologist at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, argues that the frantic pursuit of self-worth as measured through external trappings exacts a high personal and social toll.



WRITTEN BY: **JIM FOREST**

"The pursuit of self-esteem has short-term benefits but long-term costs," says Crocker, "ultimately diverting people from fulfilling their fundamental human needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy and leading to poor self-regulation and mental and physical health." Crocker found that people whose sense of self-esteem is based on good looks, favorable reception of others, academic or vocational achievement, recreational performance or similar yardsticks are actually more at risk of difficulties, relationship conflicts, aggression and an increased likelihood of drug or alcohol dependence.

In a study of 642 college freshmen, Crocker found that students whose self-regard was based heavily on academic performance reported more stress and more conflicts with their teachers than did their peers. They spent more time studying than other students but did no better in their classes. Freshmen who invested heavily in appearing attractive reported more aggressiveness, anger and hostility than others, more alcohol and drug use and more symptoms of such eating disorders. They also became more depressed as the year wore on.

In contrast, it's striking that students who judged themselves by more internal measures such as religious faith or virtue were less likely to show anger and aggression and more restrained in their use of alcohol and drugs even though some of them had to cope with greater feelings of loneliness for being outside the main currents of social life on campus. While it should hardly come as headline news, Dr. Crocker's studies show that an obsession with external markers of self-worth leads to self-absorption. The correction for an exclusive focus on the self, Crocker argues, cannot be found in self-esteem classes that encourage children to believe that their personal success and happiness are of paramount importance. "Not everything is about 'me,'" Dr. Crocker said. "There are sometimes bigger things that we should be concerned about."

I'm not OK.

A different, more intimate kind of evidence that the current self-esteem mania is being challenged recently greeted me at the Matthew 25 House in Akron, Ohio. The founder is Joe May, a member of Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church and a graduate of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary. In what was formerly a crack house, Joe and those who work with him take in homeless men. At the moment the guests include a number of refugees from Latin America and also some US-born ex-convicts. In the house library there was no sign of the *I'm Okay, You're Okay* type of book, but in an adjacent bathroom, next to the mirror, was a small sign that read:

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WRITTEN BY: JIM FOREST

I am not a big deal.

I am not a big deal.

I am not a big deal.

Over lunch I asked what was behind this surprising message. Joe explained that during confession his priest once suggested that every morning he repeat the words “I am not a big deal” three times. Just to make sure he remembered Joe put the text in the place where he shaves each morning.

One might also say: I am not okay. Not only am I not okay but it may well be that I will never be okay this side of heaven. In fact I am, to put it bluntly, a sinner. I am not just a sinner but I dare to say I am an expert sinner. And, not only am I not okay, but the chances are neither are you.

“We’re capable of doing some rotten things,” the Minnesota storyteller Garrison Keillor remarks, “and not all of these things are the result of poor communication. Some are the result of rottenness. People do bad, horrible things. They lie and they cheat and they corrupt the government. They poison the world around us. And when they’re caught they don’t feel remorse — they just go into treatment. They had a nutritional problem or something. They explain what they did — they don’t feel bad about it. There’s no guilt. There’s just psychology.” So eroded is our sense of sin that even in confession it often happens that people explain what they did rather than admit they did things that urgently need God’s forgiveness. “When I recently happened to confess about fifty people in a typical Orthodox parish in Pennsylvania,” the late Orthodox theologian and teacher Father Alexander Schmemmann once

wrote, “not one admitted to having committed any sin whatsoever!”

Confession is not a rite to promote self-esteem but is rather the recognition that there is rubbish in my life — things done and left undone — that damage my connection with God and with those whom God has given me to live among: people I know and people I don’t know, people I love and people I fear. Confession is facing up to all in my life that I find painful to know about myself and struggle to keep hidden or camouflaged from those whom I want to love or respect me. It is a gradual return to wholeness, a return to communion, not because I have been made admirable by the church’s sacraments but at least am pointed in the right direction and trying not to delude myself about how excellent I am when left to my own devices.



GUILT, COMMUNION AND REPENTANCE

For the person who has committed a serious sin, there are two vivid signs — the hope that what he did may never become known; and a gnawing sense of guilt. At least this is the case before the conscience becomes completely numb as patterns of sin become the structure of one’s life to the extent that hell, far from being a

possible experience in the next-life, is where I find myself in this life. It is a striking fact about our basic human architecture that we want certain actions to remain secret, not because of modesty but because there is an unarguable sense of having violated a law more basic than that in any law book — the “law written on our hearts” that St. Paul refers to in his Letter to the Romans 2:15. It isn’t simply that we fear punishment. It is that we don’t want to be thought of by others as a person who commits such deeds. One of the main obstacles to going to confession is dismay that someone else will know what I want no one to know.

We need to recover a sense of guilt, which in turn will provide the essential foothold for contrition, which in turn can motivate confession and repentance. Without guilt, there is no remorse; without remorse there is no possibility of becoming free of habitual sins. Yet there are forms of guilt that are dead-end streets. If I feel guilty that I have not managed to become the ideal person I occasionally want to be, or that I imagine others want me to be, it is precisely this kind of guilt that has no divine reference point. It is simply me contemplating me with the eye of an irritated theater critic. Christianity is not centered on performance, laws, principles, or the achievement of flawless behavior, but on Christ Himself and participation in God’s transforming love. When Christ says, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48), he is speaking not about the perfection of a student always obtaining the highest test scores or a child who manages not to step on any of the sidewalk’s cracks, but of being whole, being in a state of communion, participating in God’s love.

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WRITTEN BY: JIM FOREST

A blessed guilt is the pain we feel when we realize we have cut ourselves off from that divine communion that radiates throughout all creation. We must not suffer from the common delusion that one's sins are private or affect only a few other people. To think that our sins, however hidden, don't affect others is like imagining that a stone thrown into the water, so long as it's small enough, won't generate ripples.

This is a topic Garrison Keillor addressed in one of his Lake Wobegon stories. A friend — Keillor calls him Jim Nordberg — writes a letter in which he recounts how close he came to committing adultery. Nordberg describes himself waiting in front of his home for a colleague he works with to pick him up, a woman who seems to find him much more interesting and handsome than his wife does. They plan to drive to a professional conference in Chicago, though the conference isn't really what attracts Nordberg to this event. He knows what lies he has told others to disguise what he is doing. Yet his conscience hasn't stopped troubling him. Sitting under a spruce tree, gazing up and down the street at all his neighbors' houses, he is suddenly struck by how much the quality of life in each house depends on the integrity of life next door, even if everyone takes everyone else for granted. "This street has been good for my flesh and blood," he says to himself. He is honest enough to realize that what he is doing could bring about the collapse of his marriage and wonders if in five or ten years his new partner might not tire of him and find someone else to take his place. It occurs to him that adultery is not much different from horse trading.

Again Nordberg contemplates his neighborhood: "As I sat on the lawn looking down the street, I saw that we all depend on each other. I saw that although I thought my sins could be secret, that they are no more secret than an earthquake. All these houses and all these families — my infidelity would somehow shake them. It will pollute the drinking water. It will make noxious gases come out of the ventilators in the elementary school. When we scream in senseless anger, blocks away a little girl we do not know spills a bowl of gravy all over a white table cloth. If I go to Chicago with this woman who is not my wife, somehow the school patrol will forget to guard the intersection and someone's child will be injured. A sixth grade teacher will think, "What the hell," and eliminate South America from geography. Our minister will decide, "What the hell — I'm not going to give that sermon on the poor." Somehow my adultery will cause the man in the grocery store to say, "To hell with the Health Department. This sausage was good yesterday — it certainly can't be any worse today." By the end of the letter it's clear that Nordberg decided not to go to that conference in Chicago after all — a decision that was a moment of grace not only for him, his wife, and his children, but for many others who would have been injured by his adultery. "We depend on each other," Keillor says again, "more than we can ever know."

Far from being hidden, each sin is another crack in the world. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware has observed: "There are no entirely private sins. All sins are sins against my neighbor, as well as against God and against myself. Even my most secret thoughts are, in fact, making it more difficult for those around me to

follow Christ."

One of the most widely used of all Christian prayers, the Jesus Prayer, is only one sentence long: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to me, a sinner! Short as it is, many people drawn to it are put off by the last two words. Those who teach the prayer are often asked, "But must I call myself a sinner?" In fact, that ending isn't essential - but our difficulty using it reveals a lot. What makes me so reluctant to speak of myself in such plain words? Don't I do a pretty good job of hiding rather than revealing Christ in my life? Am I not a sinner? To admit that I am provides a starting point.

REPENTANCE AND CONFESSION

There are only two possible responses to sin: to justify it, or to repent. Between these two there is no middle ground. Justification may be verbal, but mainly it takes the form of repetition: I do again and again the same thing as a way of demonstrating to myself and others that it's not really a sin but rather something normal or human or necessary or even good. "After the first blush of sin comes indifference," wrote Henry David Thoreau in his *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*. There is an even sharper Jewish proverb: "Commit a sin twice and it will not seem a crime." Repentance, on the other hand, is the recognition that I cannot live any more as I have been living, because in living that way I wall myself apart from others and from God. Repentance is a change in direction. Repentance is the door of communion. It is also the sine qua non of forgiveness. As Fr. Alexander Schmemmann points out, "There can be no absolution where there is no repentance."

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Continued

WRITTEN BY: JIM FOREST

Repentance is the gateway to heaven. St. John Chrysostom said sixteen centuries ago while preaching in the city of Antioch: “Repentance opens the heavens, takes us to Paradise and conquers the devil. Have you sinned? Do not despair! If you sin every day, then offer repentance every day! When there are rotten parts in an old house, we replace the parts with new ones, and we do not stop caring for the house. In the same way, you should reason for yourself: if today you have defiled yourself with sin, immediately cleanse yourself with repentance.”

It is impossible to imagine a vital marriage or deep friendship without confession and forgiveness. If you have done something that damages a deep, loving relationship, confession is essential to its restoration. For the sake of that bond, you confess what you’ve done, you apologize, and you promise not to do it again. In the context of religious life, confession is what we do to safeguard and renew our relationship with God whenever it is damaged. Confession restores our communion with God.

The purpose of confession is not to have one’s sins dismissed as non-sins but to be forgiven and restored to communion. As St. John the Evangelist and Theologian wrote: “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). The apostle James wrote in a similar vein: “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray

for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16).

Confession is more than disclosure of sin. It also involves praise of God and profession of faith. Without the second and third elements, the first is pointless. To the extent we deny God, we reduce ourselves to accidental beings on a temporary planet in a random universe expanding into nowhere. To the extent that we have a



sense of God’s existence, we discover everything in creation confessing God and see all beauty as a confession of God and His existence. We discover that faith is not so much something we have as something we experience — and we confess that experience much as glass confesses light. In his autobiography, *The Confessions*, St. Augustine drew on all three senses of the word. He confessed certain sins, chiefly those that revealed the process that had brought him to faith and baptism, making him a disciple of Christ and member of the Church. He confessed his faith. His book as a whole is a work of praise, a confession of God’s love. But it is the first meaning — confession

of sins — that is usually the most difficult. It is never easy admitting to doing something you regret and are ashamed of, an act you attempted to keep secret or denied doing, or tried to blame on someone else, perhaps arguing — to yourself as much as to others — that it wasn’t actually a sin at all, or wasn’t nearly as bad as some people might claim. In the hard labor of growing up, one of the most agonizing tasks is becoming capable of saying, “I’m sorry.” Yet we are designed for confession. Secrets in general are hard to keep, but un-confessed sins not only never go away but have a way of becoming heavier as time passes — the greater the sin, the heavier the burden. Confession is the only solution.

To understand confession in its sacramental sense, one first has to grapple with a few basic questions: Why is the Church involved in forgiving sins? Is priest-witnessed confession really needed? Why confess at all to any human being? In fact, why bother confessing to God even without a human witness? If God is really all-knowing, then he knows everything about me already. My sins are known before it even crosses my mind to confess them. Why bother telling God what God already knows? Yes, truly God knows. My confession can never be as complete or revealing as God’s knowledge of me and all that needs repairing in my life. A related question we need to consider has to do with our basic design as social beings.

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WRITTEN BY: JIM FOREST

Why am I so willing to connect with others in every other area of life, yet not in this? Why is it that I look so hard for excuses, even for theological rationalizations, not to confess? Why do I try so hard to explain away my sins until I've decided either they're not so bad or might even be seen as acts of virtue? Why is it that I find it so easy to commit sins yet I am so reluctant, in the presence of another, to admit to having done so?

We are social beings. The individual as autonomous unit is a delusion. The individual is someone who has lost a sense of connection to others or attempts to exist in opposition to others — while the person exists in communion with other persons. At a conference of Orthodox Christians in France not long ago, in a discussion of the problem of individualism, a theologian confessed, "When I am in my car, I am an individual, but when I get out, I am a person again." We are social beings. The language we speak connects us to those around us. The food I eat was grown by others. The skills passed on to me have slowly been developed in the course of hundreds of generations. The air I breathe and the water I drink is not for my exclusive use but has been in many bodies before mine. The place I live, the tools I use, and the paper I write on were made by many hands. I am not my own doctor or dentist or banker. To the extent I disconnect myself from others, I am in danger. Alone I die, and soon. To be in communion with others is life. Because we are social beings, an essential element of confession is doing all I can to set right what I did wrong. If I stole something, it must be returned or paid for. If I lied to anyone, I must tell that person the truth. If I was angry without good reason, I must apologize. I must seek forgiveness not only from God but

from those whom I have wronged or harmed.

We are also verbal beings. Words provide not only a way of communicating with others but even with ourselves. The fact that confession is witnessed by a priest forces me to put into words all those ways, minor and major, in which I live as if there were no God and no commandment to love. A thought that is concealed has great power over us. Confessing sins, or even temptations, makes us better able to resist. The underlying principle is described in one of the collections of sayings of the Desert Fathers, the Gerontikon: "If impure thoughts trouble you, do not hide them, but tell them at once to your spiritual father and condemn them. The more a person conceals his thoughts, the more they multiply and gain strength. But an evil thought, when revealed, is immediately destroyed. If you hide things, they have great power over you, but if you could only speak of them before God, in the presence of another, then they will often wither away, and lose their power." Confessing to anyone, even a stranger in an airport, renews rather than contracts my humanity, even if all I get in return for my confession is the well-worn remark, "Oh that's not so bad. After all, you're only human" — something like the New Yorker cartoon in which a psychologist reassures a Mafia contract killer stretched out on the couch, "Just because you do bad things doesn't mean you're bad." But if I can confess to anyone anywhere, why confess in church in the presence of a priest? It's not a small question in societies in which the phrase "institutionalized religion" is so often used, the implicit message being that religious institutions necessarily impede or undermine

religious life. Yet it's not a term we seem inclined to adapt to other contexts. Few people would prefer we got rid of institutionalized health care or envision a world without institutionalized transportation. Whatever we do that involves more than a few people requires structures.

THE COMMUNAL CHARACTER OF CONFESSION

Confession is a Christian ritual with a communal character. Confession in the church differs from confession in your living room in the same way that getting married in church differs from simply living together. The communal aspect of the event tends to safeguard it, solidify it, and call everyone to account — those doing the ritual, and those witnessing it. In the social structure of the Church, a huge network of local communities is held together in unity, each community helping the others and all sharing a common task while each provides a specific place to recognize and bless the main events in life from birth to burial. Confession is an essential part of that continuum. My confession is an act of reconnection with God and with all the people who depend on me and have been harmed by my failings and from whom I have distanced myself through acts of non-communion. The community is represented by the person hearing my confession, an ordained priest designated to serve as Christ's witness, who provides the guidance and wisdom that helps each of us overcome attitudes and habits that take us off course and who declares forgiveness and restores us to communion. In this way our repentance is brought into the community that has been damaged by our sins — a private event in a public context.

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WRITTEN BY: JIM FOREST

“It’s a fact,” writes Orthodox theologian Fr. Thomas Hopko, the retired dean of St. Vladimir’s Seminary, “that we cannot see the true ugliness and hideousness of our sins until we see them in the mind and heart of the other to whom we have confessed.”

Though we often dread it, confession itself is something beautiful. I think of Zacharia, a large, round-faced Ethiopian woman of a grandmotherly age with a faded cross tattooed on her forehead, who is often the first person in line for confession in our parish in Amsterdam. The priest receives her, as he does all penitents, by reciting words that remind her that he is only a witness to the confession about to be made and that it is Christ the physician, invisibly present, who heals and forgives. Zacharia speaks little Dutch, still less English, and not a word of Russian, Greek, or German — thus no language that any of our priests understands. It doesn’t matter. She stands before the icon of Christ, her upraised hands rising and falling rhythmically, relating in her incomprehensible mother tongue whatever is burdening her. As the

priest grasps not a word of what she is saying, he does nothing more than quietly recite the Jesus Prayer until Zacharia is finished. Then she kneels down while he places the lower part of his priestly stole over her head and recites the prayers of forgiveness.



With the last words of the prayer, he traces the sign of the cross on the head of this African woman who misses the Liturgy only if ill. Then Zacharia rises, turns to face him, and receives a final blessing before the

next person comes forward and the confessions continue.

Parents often bring infants and children with them when they confess. This is their gradually unfolding introduction to the sacrament. On a recent Sunday in our parish I noticed Fr. Sergei Ovsiannikov, rector of our parish, hearing a young mother’s confession while holding her baby in his arms. I recall of an over-crowded church, St. Cosmas and Damien, in Moscow on a Sunday morning. Three priests are hearing confessions with a long line for each of them. The priest I happen to be standing nearest was Fr. Georgi Chistiakov, an ascetic man who looks something like a Russian Ichabod Crane, only Fr. Georgi’s face seems mainly full of joy. Penitents, aware of how many people are awaiting their turn, tend to be brief. In some cases they simply hand Fr. Georgi a piece of paper on which they have written what they have to confess. In these cases he reads the paper, tears the paper in half, and gives the fragments back to the person, as if to say, “Your sins are now in the rubbish bin.”