

Do You Go to Confession?

On returning to Catholicism after a thirty-year absence, this was the most common question that I was asked. Oh, not right away, and usually after a few preliminary feelers, but it almost always came up eventually: “Do you go to confession?” Sometimes the real question was, “Do they still have confession?” Other times it was, “Do you, a not-particularly-humble (one might even say arrogant), person actually recognize, much less acknowledge your failings out loud to another person?” Often the unspoken words were, “Isn’t it horrible?” or “I could never do that.”

And, of course, there were the stories from childhood. Stories about lying in confession, then confessing to lying. Some made up sins to confess because their actual failings were insufficient. Others had a list that they confessed every time, regardless of what had actually been going on: “I talked back to my mother three times said a bad word twice and stole a piece of chalk from the blackboard once that’s all Father. Oh, and I lied once.” Some remembered the kids in line who actually wrote down lists to read from. Everyone knew that the time spent in the confessional was of critical importance. Too little time and everyone knew that you lied;

too much time and everybody wondered what you had been up to.

Some of the best confessions were the practice ones with Sister Mary (insert saint's name here) before the all-important first confession. Whole classes of murdering, embezzling, hubcap-stealing second graders 'fessed up to their foul deeds while learning the routine for the real event: "Bless me, Sister, unh, Father, this is my first confession. I killed my sister once, stole a million dollars and watched TV twice after I was supposed to be in bed. That's all, Father . . . ah . . . Sister . . . Father." These snapshots of our tiny grade school psyches must have led thousands of nuns to lay their heads on their desks in convulsive laughter, or in prayers of thanksgiving that we were too small to act on our impulses.

Everyone has some version of "The Priest Who Fell Asleep," "The Priest Who Talked Real Loud," "How to Get the Priest Who Gave Easy Penances" and "How Me and My Friend Harold Tried to Sneak Up and Hear Carole Ellen Plante's Confession to See if She Was Really Fast Like Eddie Moore Said She Was." Popular among boys is the "The Time the Priest Got Really Mad at Me." Girls had more versions of "How Much I Worried That I Forgot Something and Would Go *Straight to Hell* if I Got Hit by a Truck."

By the time junior high came around, sins against purity rose to the confessional Top Ten list, although plenty of kids had apparently been routinely confessing them for years with no idea what they were. The rush of hormones clarified this matter considerably, inspiring

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new waves of creativity in the confessional and tortured anxiety the rest of the time. New techniques, such as “How to Say ‘Masturbation’ without Really Saying It,” and new questions, such as “Is French Kissing an Impure Act If You Really Didn’t Feel Anything?” came to the fore. New stories included “The Priest Who Asked a Lot of Questions” and “The Priest Who Asked a *Real* Lot of Questions.”

Most stories were amused, affectionate memories of childhood antics and worries, of harried, tolerant priests trying to do their best. Some were genuinely awful memories of hurt and bewilderment. These were never recounted in detail and didn’t lend themselves to funny titles. They were alluded to in the eyes-averted, hushed-voice tones of real pain and of continuing humiliation. These were the stories of being shamed and berated in the confessional, of fear and of anger. In tight-lipped bitterness, in sadness and with firm resolution, these allusions came with the spoken or unspoken message, “That will never happen to me again.”

Most people who asked, “Do you go to confession?” counted themselves as “fallen away,” “lapsed” or “recovering” Catholics. I eventually realized that many who considered themselves to be active Catholics did not ask this question for one reason: they do not participate in the sacrament of reconciliation. While the whole matter of confession can be a matter of intense curiosity, explicit distress or just great stories for those who no longer practice, it is a matter of considerable anxiety for many of those who do. They find them-

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selves in a tight bind, eager to practice their faith but avoiding this most personal of sacraments.

For active and inactive Catholics alike, the anxiety peeking out from the blanket of humor, the anger and fear of those hurt in the past, the worry and self-consciousness, all make it difficult to find the healing and mercy so central to our faith. Beginning to think about reconciliation is the first step in getting over our distress about confession.

Reconciliation

When Father John first mentioned the sacrament of reconciliation to me, I thought, 'Wow. They even invented a new sacrament while I was gone.' Once he had clarified the situation, my next thought was, 'I've got to throw up,' followed by, 'I'm outta' here.' Actually, I made a statement, many statements, over weeks and weeks, mostly involving how I was never going to do this again, how I was not going to be in any religion that involved this kind of brutalizing, stupid practice, ever, no way, no how, thank you very much, goodbye. Those weeks of conversations could be pretty much characterized as follows:

"I'm not going to do it."

"You don't have to, A. M."

"No way I'm going to do it."

"You don't have to, A. M."

"No *!%*!& way I'm going to do it."

"No one can make you, A. M."

"It's not going to happen, so you can forget it!"

"That's all right, A. M."

"I'm not going to do it!"

"Will you *listen* to yourself?"

Was I one of those people who had had a Bad Experience in confession? Oh, yes. Was I going to get over it? Not if I could help it.

Father John, having been around the track a few times, began to talk about reconciliation. Not *reconciliation*, certainly not the *sacrament of reconciliation*, just reconciliation. I don't remember that he even used the word *reconciliation* at first, since it tended to lead to condensed, colorful versions of the dialogue above. Sometimes, we would just sit quietly for a while, time that I needed to calm myself. We talked about a lot of things, and even got around to gingerly touching on The Bad Experience. We sat quietly quite a lot. I began to experience safety and assurance. I began to feel cared for and accepted.

I began to experience reconciliation.

Long before we ever celebrated the sacrament of reconciliation, we celebrated compassion. In Father John's gentleness and sense of humor, I began to recognize God's mercy, to accept God's touch and to allow the gradual softening of my heart. It was as though, for a long time, Father John would hold this gift out to me on an open palm, or sometimes wordlessly set it on the arm of my chair. Sometimes I would ignore it. Sometimes I would pick it up and turn it around, looking at the outside. Occasionally I would ask him to untie the string. A few times I unexpectedly took off more of the wrapping than I intended and got a little panicked. He carefully took it from me, wrapped it up and set it on the arm of my chair again. He would smile

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a little, and say, "It's alright, A. M." He probably said "It's alright, A. M.," a thousand times. I was learning about God, about God's compassion and tolerance and forgiveness, through the compassion and tolerance and forgiveness of a human being. I was learning that it really was all right.

In gradually coming to recognize how God enfolded me, I began to see that this was of itself a healing. I began to understand that God had already given me the gift, and all I had to do was unwrap it.

Did I unwrap it? Nope. Was I going to do it? No way, no how, not ever, no thanks, see you later, 'bye. I had been learning about reconciliation, but when I thought about it, the automatic find/replace function of my consciousness inserted *confession* for every occurrence of *reconciliation*. Smooth reptiles whispered, "Bad Experience!" in my ear and every neuron in my body screamed, "Run! Run for your life!" God's part of reconciliation sounded pretty good, but the practical human details were too awful to think about.

Of course, I thought about them all the time. Could I do this with Father John, or would it have to be with some other priest? Would I have to go in one of those little rooms? What would I say? How could I be sure that nothing bad would happen? What would I say? What would he say? What would I say? Could you do it wrong? What would I say? Father John had explained this already, probably two or three times, but I find that it's hard to listen when your neurons are running for their lives and any religion without this sacrament is

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looking better all the time. I never did get the gory details straightened out, until one day, heart in my throat, I said, "I wonder if we could have reconciliation?" and Father John said, "Yes. Yes, we could."