

The Other Side of the Confessional

Alec Guinness, the renowned British actor, once was filming a movie in a village in Burgundy, France. He was playing the role of a priest. During a break from the shooting, he headed off the set, still in full clerical attire, to return to his room in the little hotel. As he was walking down the *rue*, a young boy came running up to him, calling out, “*Mon père!*” Guinness recounts in his memoir, *Blessings in Disguise*:

My hand was seized by a boy of seven or eight, who clutched it tightly, swung it and kept up a non-stop prattle. He was full of excitement, hops, skips and jumps, but never let go of me. I didn't dare speak in case my excruciating French should scare him. Although I was a total stranger he obviously took me for a priest and so to be trusted. Suddenly with a “*Bon soir, mon père,*” and a hurried sideways sort of bow, he disappeared through a hole in a hedge. He had had a happy, reassuring walk home, and I was left with an odd calm sense of elation.¹

Guinness recalls being struck at that moment by the mystery and power of the Catholic priesthood: that a young boy would feel such immediate trust and affection for him, a stranger and foreigner, simply because he believed him to be a priest. A year later Guinness entered the Catholic church.

Of course, in recounting his impressions, Alec Guinness was sharing simply what he felt while playing the role of a priest. But what are the thoughts and feelings of actual priests when they are sitting in a confessional, listening to sinners' heartfelt confessions, offering them counsel and absolving them of even the gravest sins?

It was interesting to me how many lay persons, when I told them about the project of this book, were most intrigued by that question. Are priests bothered by penitents' sometimes tedious recitation of their sins? Do they get bored hearing confessions? Are priests saddened that Catholics are not living more faithfully the moral standards of their faith? What is it really like to be on the other side of the confessional?

A Demanding Ministry

Pope John Paul described the role of confessor in the sacrament of penance as "undoubtedly the most difficult and sensitive, the most exhausting and demanding ministry of the priest, but also one of the most beautiful and consoling."² I would certainly say for myself that, compared with almost any other pastoral situation, hearing confessions requires the greatest attentiveness and concentration, the most care and prudence in how I respond. And after a few hours in the confessional without a break, yes, it can even at times become physically demanding. One particularly busy Holy Week I developed a crick in my neck from continuously bending my right ear toward the confessional screen; so I turned my chair around and leaned over with my left ear instead.

But like the pope, I have found my ministry in the sacrament of penance to be one of the most fulfilling and moving parts of my priesthood. I think and hope it is true that, except for situations where I had to leave to say Mass for a waiting

congregation, I have never turned down a request by a penitent to go to confession.

There is nothing special about that. In the vast majority of cases in my life, both before and after I was ordained, I have never encountered a moment's hesitation by any priest whom I have asked to hear my own confession, no matter the time or the place. Indeed, a ninety-year-old priest once told me categorically: "In sixty-five years as a priest, I have never turned down a request to go to confession!"

Church law obliges a priest who is entrusted by his office with the "care of souls" (*cura animarum*) to provide for the hearing of confessions for the members of his flock "when they reasonably ask to be heard." And in case of "urgent necessity," canon law states, any confessor is obliged to hear the confessions of the Christian faithful.³

I believe we priests intuitively feel that administering this sacrament is, like celebrating the Eucharist, one of the most sacred privileges and important duties that we perform for our people. It is revealing, I think, that for all the abuses and faults that priests have been charged with throughout the long history of the church, I am not aware of any historical period when a major complaint against the clergy was that they violated the absolute confidentiality of the sacrament of penance. On the contrary, just as they have given their lives to celebrate and preserve the Eucharist, so too priests have gone to their deaths rather than reveal to demanding kings or imperious judges the secrets of a soul that they learned under the seal of the confessional.

Given the governmental animus toward religion in general and Christianity in particular in secular Western societies, it is conceivable that priests will again be called to witness to the inviolable sanctity of sacramental confession at

the price of their own personal suffering. In some states, for instance, clergy are now included as “mandated reporters” of specific crimes such as child abuse, without any exemption for the absolute confidentiality of the priest/penitent relationship in the sacrament of penance.

Several years ago we even witnessed a state prosecutor secretly taping a prison confession made by a prison inmate suspected of murder. The confessor, a local pastor, knew nothing of the clandestine recording. The Oregon prosecutor only refrained from introducing the tape as evidence in court because of the strong condemnation by Bishop Kenneth Steiner of the Portland archdiocese and the ensuing public outcry.⁴

To begin to answer the question “What is it like to be on the other side of the confessional?” think of all the different sorts of people whom the priest encounters in the sacrament. The stressed-out mother feeling guilty about losing her temper with her husband and children. The high school student who has begun experimenting with alcohol or drugs or sex. The bachelor in his twenties or thirties who has not been to the sacraments in years but, perhaps at a wedding rehearsal, suddenly feels the need to go to confession. The middle-aged executive forced to reflect on all his adult moral decisions as he lies in a hospital bed the night before a serious surgery. The woman in her forties, crying over her abortion twenty years before, who desperately wants to hear that God—and her baby—forgive her. The elderly widows and widowers struggling with loneliness and jealousy and despair, who need to know that God has not forgotten them. Yes, even the little boy who expects to be taken very seriously as he solemnly relates how he disobeys his parents and fights with his siblings and teases his cat.

To the confessor there is some undefined trait that all these penitents share when they enter that sacred space, be it a confessional box or a reconciliation room or just the cubicle of a hospital bed. In that awesome meeting of a human being's freedom in admitting guilt and God's love poured out in forgiving grace, every Christian, young and old, comes to resemble the "little children" to whom the gospel promises the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:14).

Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete, a theologian and priest of the Archdiocese of Washington, made that point in a column about hearing confessions in *The New York Times Magazine*:

Confession is not therapy, nor is it moral accounting. At its best, it is the affirmation that the ultimate truth of our interior life is our absolute poverty, our radical dependence, our unquenchable thirst, our desperate need to be loved....

Confessing even the most dramatic struggles, I have found, people reach for the simplest language, that of a child before a world too confusing to understand. Silent wonder is the most natural response to a revelation that surpasses all words.⁵

A Humbling Work

What is it like for the priest to be part of this mysterious encounter, this revelation of God's grace and mercy "that surpasses all words"? Priests too are often reduced to "silent wonder" before the mystery of the sacrament of which they are the unworthy ministers. But sometimes they do articulate their feelings. When I asked several priests to reflect on their experience in hearing confessions, I was both interested and impressed by their sincere responses.

Firstly and fundamentally, the experience of hearing confessions *humbles* the priest. That was the almost universal reaction I received from the priests whom I queried. As one wise veteran pastor, himself a confessor and advisor to many other priests, put it: “Each time I say those great words, ‘and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit’—and especially when I sense the penitent deeply receiving those words—I am moved spiritually and experience a grace of holy humility. I cannot express it well here, but it is profound to be saying those words and witnessing how they move the one receiving them.”

It is indeed humbling to witness the sincerity and openness of Catholics—almost like that of a child—who unburden their consciences to the priest in the sacrament of penance, aware at some profound level that the person to whom they are really confessing is Jesus Christ. The priest cannot help but be inspired when he listens to a contrite fellow sinner willing to look humbly and honestly at his or her own moral failings and personal brokenness.

As a homilist I can certainly recall times when individuals have confronted me about things I have said from the pulpit. As vocation director I have had people argue with me about a particular judgment I have made. But as a confessor I have found it unusual to be challenged by a penitent about something I have said to him or her while administering the sacrament of penance. In fact, it is rare in my experience to encounter a penitent who even gives a sense of being guarded with me as the priest. The much more common situation for the confessor is to find himself looking into eyes that are keenly focused on his as he gives them words of counsel. Even through a screen I can sense when a penitent is attending carefully to every word I say.

Still more humbling for a priest is hearing a moral failing confessed that he himself is struggling with—and sometimes struggling with less conscientiously and successfully than the penitent. As one young priest describes it, “to hear confessions is especially humbling when the persons confessing appear to be more spiritually advanced than I am, and they possess insights about their own sinfulness which I have yet to recognize in my own life. I say to myself interiorly, ‘Yes, I should confess that sin too.’”

For the priest it is like looking through a two-way mirror. He may find himself giving heartfelt advice to the penitent about dealing with a certain vice or difficulty, and to that person the priest appears simply to be reflecting the picture just described in the confession. The priest, however, is both looking into the soul of the penitent and simultaneously examining his own conscience; the words of counsel he delivers are addressed, as it were, both to the penitent and to himself.

This is not by any means to suggest that a priest is an effective confessor only when he has experienced the moral challenge and occasion of sin that is related to him in confession. That argument, sometimes used to question the capability of celibate priests to minister to parishioners with marriage problems, rests on a faulty premise that one would never think to apply to any other profession: as if a cancer patient should not trust an oncologist unless the doctor had been treated for a melanoma, or a defendant should not have confidence in a lawyer who had never been indicted and successfully beat the rap!

What it does reveal, though, is something of the ineffable wisdom of God’s incarnational plan, which puts this wonderful sacrament of divine forgiveness in the hands of weak men who are fellow sinners in need of God’s mercy. As the Dutch

spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once put it, in a memorable phrase that became the title of one of his popular books, the pastoral minister always presents himself to his people as “the wounded healer.”⁶

Meeting the Challenge

Along with this experience of being humbled, it is true that hearing confessions *challenges* the priest on many levels. Most obviously, he is challenged to listen attentively to what the penitent says, to discern the real state of the person’s soul and to offer words of counsel that both console and motivate.

Sometimes what the penitent doesn’t state is as important as what is explicitly stated. The mother who confesses losing her temper regularly with her family turns out, after a couple of brief questions by the priest, to be working full-time, raising four young children and also caring for a parent with Alzheimer’s. A confessor may not be able to provide an “answer” that reduces the pressures in her life that give rise to the explosions of temper. But he can at least reassure her that her fidelity to her vocation as wife, mother and daughter is something of immense value in God’s eyes, even with her faults. And he can encourage her to consciously offer that faithful witness, especially when she is worn thin and exhausted, as her particular “living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1).

At other times the confessor needs to interpret a vague reference, for instance, to “sins of impurity” or “stealing from work.” Again, without prying into details unnecessarily or turning confession into an interrogation, the priest does need to find out if a penitent confessing impurity is talking about a lingering look at an erotic magazine cover in the check-out line or a nightly habit of accessing pornographic Web sites on

the computer; whether “stealing from work” refers to occasionally pilfering some pens or notepads from the office supply cabinet or rather to stealing thousands of dollars from clients or taxpayers or investors through deliberate fraud.

In the sacrament of penance the priest is challenged to be concerned personally about the Christian kneeling or sitting before him. Pope John Paul II, in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, said that the confessor shows his pastoral concern by “paternally admonishing these penitents with a firm, encouraging and friendly ‘Do not sin again.’”⁷ In other words, the confessional is not a “values-neutral” counseling center, nor does the priest seek to practice “non-directive” listening, as popularized by the psychologist and writer Carl Rogers in the sixties and seventies.

When I hear confessions of high school seniors who are already abusing alcohol and drugs or sexually acting out, I try to point out to them, in a way that is kind but also direct, that they are embarking on a path that will be inevitably self-destructive—personally, emotionally, physically, spiritually. When a middle-aged spouse shares with me thoughts about leaving a partner of twenty years and their children for a new, younger mate, I do not suggest “follow your heart” (as one counselor advised a husband I knew), but rather I do all I can to goad the person’s conscience into considering the moral and personal consequences of an impulsive act that will violate God’s law and permanently injure the lives of an entire family.

Real pastoral concern on the part of the priest does not end, though, with the spiritual advice that he gives to the penitent. The priest is also challenged to be a spiritual intercessor for members of the faithful who have entrusted themselves to him in that “sacred space where God is the third party

present,” to cite the wonderful phrase used by a priest I know to refer to confession. Minimally, the priest should do this, consciously and with conviction, whenever he recites the prayer of absolution over a penitent: “Through the ministry of the church, may God give you pardon and peace . . .” But ideally he should feel inspired outside of the confessional as well to remember and to pray—even to do penance—for those whom he has reconciled to Christ and his church.

The *Catechism* explicitly mentions this extended mediating role of the priest confessor, when it says that the confessor “must pray and do penance for his penitent, entrusting him to the Lord’s mercy.”⁸ I admit that it is not a practice that, to my knowledge, many priests follow literally. But I am aware of a few cases in which a priest did consciously adopt this deeper sense of spiritual fatherhood and pastoral responsibility for souls.

One recently ordained priest, for example, relates how his godfather, with whom he was very close, was not actively practicing his faith. Every day as a priest and before that as a seminarian, he would say a *Memorare* before the statue of Our Lady for the intention of his godfather’s return to the church. He had hoped that this would occur at his ordination—but it didn’t.

On Wednesday of his first Holy Week as a priest, his godfather phoned and said, “I think it’s time I go to confession. Can you help me?” The young priest finally saw the rewards of his long spiritual intercession as he gave Holy Communion to his godfather at his first Easter Mass.

A Source of Inspiration

Lastly, I believe that hearing confessions inevitably *inspires* the priest. This actually may be more the case now than prior