

Chapter 20: Thinking about Confession

*No one who conceals his sins will prosper,
But whoever confesses and renounces them will find mercy.
Proverbs 28:13*

Whereas a formal, general confession... that overlooks the particular mistakes of the day, and is the same, whether the day be spent ill or well, has little or no effect upon the mind; a man may use such a daily confession, and yet go on sinning and confessing all his life, without any remorse of mind, or true desire of amendment.

For if your own particular sins are left out of your confession, your confessing of sin in general has no more effect upon your mind than if you had only confessed that all men in general are sinners.

No other confession but such as thus discovers and accuses your own particular guilt can be an act of true sorrow, or real concern at your own condition. And a confession that is without this sorrow and compunction of heart, has nothing in it, either to atone for past sins, or to produce in us any true reformation and amendment of life.

--William Law, in A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life

The praying of the General Confession during Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Holy Eucharist has become so ingrained, that even life-long Episcopalians are frequently surprised to learn that the 1979 Book of Common Prayer includes another, very different way to confess one's sins. In fact, not one, but two, forms for private confession are included in the 1979 BCP. Each form is different in style, but equivalent in purpose.

While any discreet and prayerful priest is likely to be able to be pastorally helpful to anyone seeking to avail themselves of this sacramental rite, there is a case to be made for seeking out a priest or trained lay person who is particularly familiar with using private confessions for serious spiritual growth. There is a whole school of ascetical theology devoted to this practice, and the wisdom of the ages is not to be ignored lightly. There is also a case to be made in seeking a priest or trained lay person for sacramental confession, to enlist the services of someone outside one's immediate circle, outside the group with whom one deals regularly on many different matters.

Whether the idea of private, sacramental confession intrigues us, abhors us, or something in between, chances are that we all need to find some way to reflect seriously upon our shortcomings in our quest to follow Jesus. Without such a means of reflection, we become an addicted consumer of the grace of God's forgiveness. Isn't it presumptuous to lean on that grace repeatedly without making any effort to need it less? William Law's gentle counsel to his colleagues seems as needed today as it was by his 18th century colleagues: God doesn't just forgive our disobedience, he calls us back to obedience, to a life completely centered in Him.

How is it that you want to go about discerning the ways you may be falling out of step with Jesus? By what means do you intend to root out any particular tendencies towards sinning? Do you feel a call to help other Christians with this aspect of spiritual growth?

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