

Vatican II and the Year of Faith: My First Confession

I grew up in a Protestant church that ridiculed the Catholic sacrament of penance. I believed that Christ's sacrifice on the cross had accomplished everything necessary for my salvation. All I had to do was receive salvation by faith alone, once-for-all. The lifelong, Catholic practice of confession and penance seemed like an affront to this once-for-all salvation. The whole business of approaching Christ through a priest also seemed utterly unnecessary. Couldn't I just confess my sins to God directly? Finally, the self-examination and accusation involved in penance struck me as a recipe for a neurotic scrupulosity.

The immediate problem with my Protestant perspective, however, was the teaching of Christ. In the Gospel for Divine Mercy Sunday (the second Sunday of Easter) we read the biblical account of the institution of penance. Christ comes to the disciples on the evening of Easter Sunday and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." (John 20:22-23) Non-Catholic exegetes have tried for centuries to take this verse in something other than its obvious sense, but to no avail.

There is also a deep, interior difficulty with the Protestant view. The Protestant holds that those with "true faith" have no need for works, sacraments, saints or priests to get them to heaven. But what counts as "true faith?" How do you know if you've got it? This is a very long-standing question in Protestantism and Protestant theologians have supplied a myriad of answers. But, in a nutshell, it always boils down to a faith accompanied either by good works or by some mystical, interior quality. So, the slogan "faith alone" becomes rather hollow in practice, and their hoped-for assurance is elusive. In fact, some Protestants (Luther among them) get caught in an endless cycle of despair, presumption, hope and doubt: "I'm really saved! No, I'm fooling myself - I'm not saved at all."

Another problem with the Protestant view is that it runs counter to our very nature as physical creatures. We are not just souls or spirits floating in a void in direct relationship with God. We are flesh and blood, bodies-in-society. Our relationship to God is *always* mediated to us through others - pastors, teachers, parents, spouses, friends, books, writers, etc. We need that human element, the audible word of affirmation, the visible sign. I have witnessed this vividly in Protestant revival meetings. Penitents rush to the front of a church or auditorium, sometimes making *public* confession of their sins, longing for a word of absolution from minister or evangelist, for a visible sign of their faith and redemption. But their own theology tells them that these signs are illusory, hollow, and ultimately untrustworthy.

This brings me to my discovery of confession. I became Catholic because of the teaching of Christ and the witness of history, not because I consciously experienced the deficit in Protestant penitential theology. I went to my first confession only out of obedience to the

Church, not knowing what to expect. I stumbled through as best I could, not really knowing how to do it. But when I heard the words of absolution it was like a bomb going off in my head, or a torrent of grace pouring over my soul. I was utterly taken back.

What struck me most was the objective certainty of the sacrament. As a Protestant, I had grown accustomed to assessing the subjective quality of my faith. Was it true faith, or not? Cardinal Newman, who also grew up Protestant, referred to this tendency as “self-contemplation.” But in the confessional, the reality of the sacrament and its objective certainty do not depend on my moral worth or on any emotional state. Instead, they derive from the objective promise of Christ. All I have to bring is my contrition - my desire to get right with God. I need only contemplate the mercy of Christ in the person of his priest.

It is fitting that Christ should have instituted the sacrament on the evening of his resurrection. The resurrection of Christ is the objective sign of God’s saving plans for the world, the restoration of all things in Christ. (Ephesians 1:10) Confession is the objective sign of God’s mercy - the application of that saving grace in the life of the sinner. The Catechism says that the priest “is the sign and the instrument of God’s merciful love for the sinner.” (CCC 1465) In its decree on the priesthood (Presbyterorum Ordinis), the Second Vatican Council taught that priests “are united with the intention and love of Christ when they administer the sacraments. This is true in a special way . . . in the performance of their duty in the sacrament of Penance.”

One great blessing of the Catholic faith is its objective certainty: the certainty of the resurrection, the certainty of the Church’s teaching authority, the foundation of the Church by Christ, the historical record of apostolic succession, and so forth. But nowhere do these verities come home more directly or personally than in the objective certainty of confession. To me, the sweetest words on earth:

God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen!