

The Art of Putting Things Right: A Brief Guide to (making) "Confession"

Do you want to live a life that is completely free, fully open to God, to yourself and to others? I think that this kind of a life is possible. And I am beginning to think that the practice of confession just may be one key to making it possible.

These days we do not talk much about confession, and even less about "making" confession. Some wish to avoid an antiquated obsession with sin. Others rest in the forgiving work of Christ on the cross and feel little need to make a big deal about confession. There are also other, perhaps more sinister, reasons we avoid confession. Much too often we choose to live parts of our lives in secret, subtly hiding bits of ourselves from others and from God. The consequence? We lose the chance to freely be ourselves--the mix of bad and good that we really are--openly before God and others. We fail to live in "truth," for truth is not merely a philosophical category but is also a way of being present (similar to what we might call "sincerity"). What a tragedy!

Confession, not only to God, but also to others, has been practiced since the New Testament. Sin, and the confession of sin, was seen not merely about "me and Jesus" but is also about the Christian community. The apostle Paul urges the Corinthian church to deal strictly with a man persisting in immoral behavior, for "a little yeast leavens the whole dough" (1 Corinthians 5:6). "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed," writes the apostle James (5:16). Putting things right in Scripture involved sorrow or contrition before God, reconciliation with the Christian community (which is harmed even by our minor sins), and repentance within ourselves demonstrating an intention toward change.

The practice of confession varied through the centuries. In the first centuries of the church, people would come to the front of the church and make open declaration of their grievous sins or those that affected the congregation. Many Christian sanctuaries were arranged such that those who were repenting for serious sin would be located in a certain part of the sanctuary. In monastic circles, nuns and monks would carefully recount or "manifest" not only their sins, but their thoughts and feelings so that through the process of spiritual direction the Christian could wisely determine a strategy for positive change. The Celtic Christians developed a use of "penitential" manuals for the use of priests and such. These manuals would suggest actions that might best facilitate successful repentance on the part of people coming to them confessing various kinds of sins. Roman Catholic tradition stressed the sacramental function of confession as a preparation for communion, making things right with God. Protestant reformers, such as Luther and Cranmer strongly emphasized the forgiveness offered through Christ, but also encouraged the practice of regular confession as a means of the grace of Christ making us new week by week. Seasons of confession, both public and private, have been important elements of major revivals in the history of the Church. Perhaps this practice is due for a revival today.

But how do we begin? We begin by being honest. We mention when we are hurt, even though we "shouldn't" be hurt. This is a confession. It is a frank admission of who we are, weak as we may be. In the course of casual conversation we simply reveal ourselves honestly, even though it may not look "right" to other Christians. This is confession. We practice what I learned in high school as "spiritual breathing," a habit of *breathing out* the sinful thought or action to God whenever we notice it, and *breathing in* the filling of the Holy Spirit as a means of replacing the bad with the good. This is confession. We muster the courage to say, "I'm sorry" to another when it is needed. The best confession is not really a "practice" but is the natural outflow of a sincere Christian faith lived honestly before God, self, and others.

And yet I think there is also a place for a semi-formal discipline of confession. Again, not merely to God but also to another. And so here I will outline one way of "making confession."

First, we pause and listen. Where are things "not right"? It may be some vice that caught us once again. It may be a nagging worry that reveals our own lack of trust. It may be some breach of honor between myself and another relation. Some people choose to reflect on the whole of their lives,

making a list of these "not rights" so they can formally confess before God and another and finally get it over with. Other confessions arise out of a momentary and powerful conviction. Some have a few Scripture verses to guide their reflection. Others use their Rule of Life or some other document. There are many ways to do this. However the circumstances, the initial step is simply to wait, to listen, and then to agree with the Spirit. Part of that agreement may be to write something down on paper. "Yes, I thought this, I felt this, I did this, I failed to do this . . . "

Next, we visit someone else. We make an appointment with a trusted friend, a spiritual director, a pastor, priest or confessor. Then we simply "get it out." We admit our conviction. We read our list. We acknowledge our weakness, our negligence, our own deliberate rebellion. You may talk about about why something may have happened or what can be done to avoid things in the future. You may also inquire about the need for further confession or restitution if, in this meeting, you conclude that others could be sufficiently affected. Mostly, though, you just confess what needs to be confessed, you pray together and you receive the forgiveness of God and another person. And it is important that you sincerely *receive* that forgiveness. That is part of the freedom thing.

Finally, you leave with a new mindset. You leave intending to change. You may have thought about strategies ("next time I walk to work, I will avoid walking next to that donut store"). Then again, you may just leave knowing that God loves you even though you keep screwing up. But even though you keep screwing up both you and God know that you intend on changing. And that is enough. You are free to be yourself because you have been openly yourself before God and at least one other human being.

Even just one confession visit can be life-changing. But I can affirm from my experience that a habit, an ongoing *practice* of confession with a spiritual director or some other accountability partner, can be a powerful force. My commitment to reveal myself regularly to another prevents me from any subtle corners of hiding. And I am free, totally free, to be my crazy, fallen, self as I live my life day in and day out. Perhaps you have something to confess?