

Strengthening One Another:

A Contemporary Appropriation of the Chapter of Faults (and Affirmations)

by Evan B. Howard

There is a point in Rumer Godden's novel of monastic life, *In This House of Brede*, where the nuns comment on their "Chapter of Faults," a gathering for mutual confession. Godden writes, "The Chapter of Faults had the effect of welding the nuns together and making them like one another. "You can't be afraid of someone, even as sharp and clever as Dame Agnes," said Cecily, "when you have seen her kneel down before us all, even us young ones she teaches, and say, 'Three times yesterday I said things that cut,' or 'I lost my temper.'"

"Especially when you know you will probably lose your's tomorrow," said Hilary. (Rumer Godden, *In This House of Brede* [NY: Viking Press, 1969], 171).

For others, however, their experience of the Chapter of Faults was not so pleasant. One "SARAH" tells of her experience in Marie Thérèse Gass' *Unconventional Women: 73 Ex-Nuns Tell Their Stories*: "Every other Friday night we each knelt in front of the Novice Mistress and confessed a fault, then any of the other 60-90 Novitiate members could stand up and tell us our faults. This was probably the most psychologically damaging process in the Novitiate/Juniorate. It was unhealthy psychologically and built up much resentment among the Sisters." (see pp. 108-115 for this and other stories about Chapter of Faults).

I am thrilled at the development of--and have been consequently concerned for the health of--the many new religious communities springing up. It is a joy to witness the emergence of courageous communities of Christian believers dedicated to living out the Gospel in fresh ways either in the midst of the world's neediest populations or in other creative expressions. I have long dreamed of a revival of "religious life" (the technical term for monks and nuns and such) in which people would give themselves to a life of Gospel community, simplicity, holiness, and service in the power of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the first signs of such a revival are showing themselves today.

Consequently, I am concerned for the health of these communities. Such tender souls, with such large hopes and expectations, coming together from such different backgrounds, to accomplish such wonderful things. And yet we are all such difficult people! How can we maintain sufficient harmony, unity, and stability to enable the kinds of investments required to become an authentic force of change in the world? Yes, I believe in the ministry of the Holy Spirit, but just as I employ means of grace to facilitate the work of the Spirit in my personal life, I wonder if there are means of grace that might be employed to facilitate the Spirit's work of healing, building up, and maturing us as local communities of new religious.

I am also aware that a number of historic religious Orders (such as Benedictines, Franciscans, Jesuits and the like) have persevered through many conflicts over many centuries. While the witness of such groups has shined brighter in some seasons more than others, I find traditional religious communities worthy of closer exploration, especially by young evangelical Protestants. There is, I think, much for us to learn therein, even if we do not find ourselves "signing on." What means of grace have helped these communities to maintain their ministries over time?

It was with such interests and concerns in mind that I discovered the Chapter of Faults. The idea of people honestly opening themselves up to one another regularly, breaking down barriers of pride and self-interest in the context of a covenanted community seemed like a perfect means to facilitate a persevering harmony. But the more I investigated the Chapter of Faults, the more faults I found in the practice. And when I tried to resolve the faults while retaining something of the practice (sort-of like “having your cake and eating it, too!”), I found myself enmeshed in complex historical and theological issues.

I have not fully resolved those issues (it may require a serious investigation of the history of the doctrine and practice of penance and of the responses of the different expressions of the sixteenth century Reformations). Nevertheless, it seems worthwhile to offer some “working proposal” for a contemporary practice of a chapter of faults and affirmations to be explored in the context of religious communities today. Perhaps as we explore and communicate we can find out what works best. I will divide my presentation here into three sections. First, I will outline the historical development of the Chapter of Faults, starting with the relevant biblical material. Then I will provide a few descriptions of the practice and its strengths and weaknesses, along with a description of a practice of “affirmation” I have seen. I will conclude with a few principles that might guide this practice today.

1. Historical Development

The practice of the Chapter of Faults has its roots in the biblical injunctions regarding mutual care for one another and for the purity of the Body of Christ. James encourages his readers to “confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16). Paul speaks of spiritual gifts and spiritual leaders given for the sake of the common good or for the equipping, edifying, and maturing of the body (1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:3-5; Ephesians 4:12-13). He encourages those who are in the Spirit to restore and to discipline those who have fallen into sin (Galatians 6:1; 1 Corinthians 5:1-12; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11). Similarly Jesus outlines a process for navigating faults within the community of believers (Matthew 18:15-35).

A few central principles of community life can be learned from these and other similar passages. First, life together is a salvation-life. We share life together as means of facilitating the maturing of individuals, of the body *as* a body, and of the work of the kingdom of God more generally. Life together on earth, for Christians, is not merely (or even primarily) about finding cheap rent or common interests. We join lives together for the sake of the Lord’s influence over an increasing sphere of reality. Second, our differences contribute both to our problems (envy, factions, self-hatred, and so on) and to our growth (each gift/person expressing a unique aspect of the Spirit of Christ). Third, members of a covenanted community are responsible for each other. The myth of a private life is just that: a myth. We are our kindred’s keepers, and God made it that way. Fourth, private sins have public repercussions. What I do in secret *does* affect the life of the community as a whole, though some sins have more direct on community life than others. Public confession effects the healing of both individual and community. Fifth, forgiveness is important. Jesus’s death provided a vehicle for our forgiveness, for our welcome by God. Our experience of God’s welcome is connected to our practice of other-welcome. Finally, the means of care (for example, the degrees of warning, punishment, exclusion, readmission and so on) are matters of wisdom related to the restoration of the individual and the purity of the community.

We have reason to believe that public confession was practiced by the Christian church from its earliest centuries. The *Didache* (perhaps written before the end of the first Christian century), instructs Christians on the Lord’s day to “come together, break bread and hold Eucharist, after confessing your

transgressions that your offering may be pure; but let none who has a quarrel with his fellow join in your meeting until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice be not defiled” (xiv.1-2). Both Tertullian (c. 160-225) and Cyprian (d. 258) mention the importance of *exhomologesis*, or the public confession of sin. Accompanying the public confession of sin there developed--even in the first centuries--an expectation of penance, acts performed by the sinners which expressed their regret, encouraged their heartfelt seeking of the help of the Lord, and spurred them on toward transformation. By the fourth century different locations of the church building and various postures of those who committed serious sins were used to identify a progressive movement from punishment/penance toward full reinstatement in the church. The tension that lies underneath the development of penitential practice in the early church is their understanding of conversion. On the one hand the Church believed that conversion/baptism did something. When we give ourselves to Christ, “there is a new creation.” Thus Simon Tugwell speaks of “the venerable tradition in the church according to which the new life which we receive in baptism ought, in principle, to result in a radical and immediate change in our whole attitude and behaviour.” (*Ways of Imperfection*, 37). But what happens when the change is not so radical or immediate? Or how do we foster another’s growth in the midst of difficult temptations? How do we feel about the sinful-saved potential of new Christians? Within the context of the local churches, public confession, pastoral care, and penitential policies struggled to shepherd a growing Church into maturity of faith.

In the context of early monastic life, other factors influenced the character of confession and mutual edification. Great respect was given to the martyrs, and this respect was passed along in a similar manner to those who, through withdrawal and/or severe disciplines, lived a “white martyrdom,” putting to death all association with the world, the flesh and the devil. The early Christian ascetics became regarded as holy people, sought after for their wisdom and power. A separate “class” of Christians was developing: (1) the “religious”, those who committed themselves to a life of singlehood, financial simplicity, and the pursuit of the fullest possible obedience to the commands of Christ, and (2) the Christian populous in general, who did the best they could to follow Christ in the midst of their families and jobs and secular associations. Increasingly people came to the early ascetics for a “word” of salvation. Or they advised one another. One young monk would manifest his or her thoughts to an elder as the elder would listen for the heart of the younger and the voice of the Spirit. Emphasis was placed on both the high aim of perfection, and on the gracious, unjudgmental, wisdom of the elder. Advice and penance was given one to one with careful discerning of appropriate measure.

The fact of the matter is that, most probably, some mixture of private and public confession was present in both church and monastic settings, but it is hard to sort out all the evidence for time and location and situation. What is clear is that in time communities of monks formed who collected the sayings and wisdom of the elders who preceded them. The community context placed less emphasis on the aggressiveness of personal spiritual disciplines and more emphasis on the refining work of community life itself. Ultimately, this collection of wisdom in the context of communal monasticism becomes the development of the monastic “Rule.” In some monasteries, the Rule and the abbot can be seen as the primary vehicles through which maturity and salvation are obtained. Simon Tugwell, speaking of the strictures of the Rule of the Master, writes, “The grounds for the Master’s reluctance to allow his monks any freedom of initiative and for his insistence on continual supervision can be found in his profoundly negative view of the human will. He very nearly identifies free will with the will of the flesh, and sees its main function in practice as being to deliver us over to the devil. Salvation is accordingly seen primarily in terms of the denial of our own will, so that we walk ‘by someone else’s judgment and command’” (*Ways of Imperfection*, 73).

The Rule of the Master served as one of the models St. Benedict of Nursia used in the writing of

his Rule (c. 540). To my knowledge, the primary origin and development of the Chapter of Faults are to be found within the Benedictine Order and the Benedictine Rule. Chapters 23-30 of this Rule address the treatment of disciplinary measures for various transgressions of the monastic community, Rule, and life. The Benedictine Rule, brief and seemingly sharp at times, is actually a humanizing of its predecessors (see Appendix 4 "Disciplinary Measures in the Rule of Benedict" in *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict In Latin and English with Notes* for an excellent treatment of this). Later on, in chapter , the Rule states that:

"If anyone commits a fault while at any work--while working in the kitchen, in the storeroom, in serving, in the bakery, in the garden, in any craft or anywhere else--either by breaking or losing something or failing in any other way in any other place, he must at once come before the abbot and community and of his own accord admit his fault and make satisfaction. If it is made known through another, he is to be subjected to a more severe correction.

When the cause of the sin lies hidden in his conscience, he is to reveal it only to the abbot or to one of the spiritual elders, who know how to heal their own wounds as well as those of others without exposing them and making them public."

The condition implied in this instruction is that there is a time and place for such confessions to be made. Philip Lawrence, OSB, abbot of Christ in the Desert Benedictine Monastery, commenting on this passage specifically mentions a daily chapter as the place for such public confessions of open faults (see <http://christdesert.org/Detailed/916.html>). Clearly, the Benedictine Rule is careful to make public what needs to be public (even if someone else has to bring it up) and to permit privacy where privacy is needed.

What developed from this regulation in Benedictine history is the practice of a regular "Chapter of Faults." The term "chapter" refers to the gathering of the community for various non-liturgical purposes (instruction, decision-making, discussion of topics, and the like). These meetings were dubbed "chapters" because they would begin with a reading of a chapter of the Rule. The place where they met was likewise named the "chapter-house" or "chapter-room." A portion of the regular meeting [or special meetings] was dedicated to the mutual correction of faults. Lowrie J. Daly, in his, *Benedictine Monasticism: Its Formation and Development through the 12th Century*, describes this portion of a chapter meeting as follows:

The monks proceeded to a room near the chapel or church, usually designated as the "chapter room," where a portion of the Rule was read followed by a commentary from the superior, and then faults against the house discipline were confessed or pointed out." (p. 218)

These confessions regarded matters of common and public knowledge--the house rules. At times people owned up to their failures openly. At other times (a situation more severe, because it shows the reluctance of the person at fault to admit what they should have known) someone else had to point out the fault in the presence of the group. Other sorts of failures ("hidden" sins: those which were best not presented in front of the group) were confessed to the abbot or to wise elders. The practice of the chapter of faults spread throughout the monastic world. David Knowles speaks of this practice being employed by the primary abbots of the Cistercians when they met for their periodic business meetings (see his *Pachomius to Ignatius*, 25). Pierre Mondonnet, in his *St. Dominic and His Work* mentions that, like other monks, the friars were expected to have "a daily chapter of faults with a code of penance for infractions of the Rule." Likewise, the literature of the *devotio moderna* of the fourteenth century speaks of "fraternal correction." My suspicion is that we see the parishes of the middle ages exploring

the practice the practice of private confession, symbolized by the use of penitential manuals emerging especially by the Celtic traditions and developed by the Augustinian canons and other groups. Within monastic communities, however, the exploration of private confession was accompanied by a parallel development and expansion of a form of public confession centering around the chapter of faults. Thus the personal confession of minor injuries affecting the life of the community ("I broke the mixing bowl yesterday"), expanded to involve any infraction of the monastic rule of life and involved the accusations of one member toward another.

Consequently, by the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformers felt it necessary to reject this practice, along with the whole system of monasticism. Forgiveness, not perfection, was the effect of the work of Christ. Confession was also desacralized because of its connection with a hierarchical understanding of the priesthood. To the Reformers, our absolution is given by Christ, not a priest. And yet there was a belief in the priesthood of *all* believers. I think that this belief influenced the development in the Protestant churches of such practices as Pietist "conventicles," Methodist "bands" and other such gatherings (We might want to explore early Anglican divine Jeremy Taylor's reflections on the rite of penance here).

The practice of the chapter of faults has waned among Catholic religious in recent years. Nonetheless it is still practiced by many today.

2. The Practice of the Chapter of Faults and Affirmations

Having reviewed a little of the development of the Chapter of Faults, it is now appropriate for us to take a glimpse at what the practice looks like in current monastic practice. I have not done extensive surveys yet, but a few sample descriptions can be found in Marie Thérèse Gass's *Unconventional Women*. Needless to say, these are stories of women who ultimately left religious life, and, consequently, the descriptions reflect their bias. Nonetheless, I think that their descriptions of the meeting itself can give us a flavor of the practice. Later we will turn to an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the Chapter of Faults.

Here is one description of the practice:

(a) "Nuns entered the chapter room in rank, eyes cast down completely silent, with hands folded under the scapular or tucked into their opposite sleeves. After everyone was seated, the Superior would begin with a prayer. Then individual nuns would rise from their chairs and accuse themselves before everyone of certain faults or infractions of the Rule (*Je m' accuse*, in French Orders), after which the Superior could ask if anyone else accused that nun of yet other faults. There was no arguing--if someone accused you, you stood accused, and you bowed your head to accept your penance. Penances to be performed could be to recite certain prayers, or a personal act of reparation such as an apology and doing something for the offended person, but often the penances given involved public humiliation in their performance, usually in the refectory during meal time."

And here is another:

(b) "The Sisters would file in rank--anybody who was in your convent, and sit facing each other on sides of an aisle (usually 3-4 rows on each side). We had a sermon by the Superior who was sitting at the head of the aisle facing the Sisters, and she would say, "You may begin your accusations," and beginning with the youngest in rank, we'd take turns getting up, going to the middle of the aisle, and accuse ourselves of failing in poverty, (I never heard about chastity) or obedience, or whatever. Then you would say, "Sister, would you please have

charity to tell me my faults."

And another:

(c) "One at a time by rank, Sisters came forward and knelt in front of the Superior accusing themselves of, e.g. lack of religious decorum by running on the stairs. Then they would ask, "Sister would you have the charity to tell me my faults." Usually two or three Sisters, sometimes more, would stand, and in order of rank, mention a lapse that they'd seen, e.g. "Sister seems to fail in the silence of action by slamming doors." If you'd been next to say the same thing, you sat down. If you'd had something different to say, you said it. This seemed gently done, consistently. We were all under the same rules. once in a great while, no one had anything to say to the kneeling Sister. usually then, the presiding Sister would comment, again, kindly. The Sister next in rank would be standing behind the kneeling one waiting to take her place, so that there were never gaps of waiting. When the Postulants were done, a few words were said to them and they were dismissed. I was impressed when, finally wearing the black habit, I saw the Mistress of Novices, the Superior, and Provincial Superior, and further, the Superior General each had a Sister whose responsibility it was to point out to her her external infractions of the rule. Only once did I hear a Sister mention something that was a matter for confession. Mother Superior stopped her immediately but gently, and told her so."

This last example gives a slightly different picture of the practice:

(d) "Our chairs were lined up, eyes lowered as Mother Superior noted deviations from the rule. She didn't name names, but when you recognized yourself, you got up from the chair and kissed the floor. Mother Superior might then give you a penance, and when she released you, you would again kiss the floor. You always kept your eyes lowered during this time."

A few elements are common to all of these accounts. In all but one (d), the process involves self-accusation. In all but one (d) other sisters have permission to accuse. Penance was mentioned in two of the examples. Clearly the Mother Superior plays an important role in guiding the flow and character of these meetings. What is common to all is that it addresses the *faults* of the sisters, points at which they have *failed* to maintain the common values of the Rule. And with this we are led to examine a different example.

Here I present my own description of the Church of the Sojourner's practice of common *affirmation*:

(e) It is Sunday evening, the time of the worship service. We are seated in a circle with chairs added in the center to fit everybody. We have taken the first part of our communion (the bread), and have eaten supper together. Perhaps a sermon has been given (periodically the sermon follows the affirmations). The leader for the night will introduce the time of affirmation by saying that this is the time in our week where we say where we've seen God at work in other people's lives. Then the leader will usually offer up one affirmation to prime the pump (for example, "I've seen God at work in you, X, in the way you graciously opened the door for me last night when my arms were full of groceries"). Then another member will offer an affirmation of someone else. A single affirmation usually takes between thirty seconds to a minute to deliver. A wide range of topics are mentioned: someone handled a particular situation well, a conflict was resolved, some grace or gift was expressed and noticed--even the fact that someone is present at the gathering--especially in a time of difficulty--is reason for affirmation. No "cross-talk" is allowed. We simply move from one affirmation to the next. There is no attempt to "cover everybody in the room," but there is a sense of breadth in the offerings. Often the affirmations are divided between a time for children and a time for adults. We realize as we

mature in this practice over the years that this time is not merely (or even primarily) *about* individuals. If we have some private affirmation to offer an individual we are free to give it to her/him in person. We are here in this time to publicly recognize the presence of God at work in the Body of Christ. After somewhere between ten and twenty minutes, depending on the schedule for the night, the person who opened the time closes it, perhaps with a comment that just because we are closing the time does not mean that affirmations can't be given later privately.

With (e) we no longer have even the common idea of a mutual confession of *faults*. Now *affirmations* are central. And yet there is something similar about this gathering to those we explored earlier. One-by-one people offer brief comments about another (I've not witnessed a self-affirmation yet) and then sit down. The time is short, regular, and important. Like the monastic "chapter of faults," these times are about the community, not just the individuals.

There are strengths and weaknesses of these kinds of sharing. Over time they can become ritual and even trivial (for example, addressing how we open or shut doors). But don't we communicate our relationships with others through the mundane, even trivial, events of the day? Is the triviality a weakness or a strength? There is the vulnerability of being open to the input of your community. This is not easy: in receiving affirmation as well as correction. Yet it is well known that people are devastated by correction much more easily than they are strengthened by affirmation. It takes a number of compliments to balance out one corrective comment. In the traditional chapter of faults, the attention is normally placed on infractions of the Rule, not on personal sin. Nevertheless, as one sister put it, "as in everything in life, however, there was overlap, e.g. being angry with someone could be construed as the sin of anger as well as the fault of fault of "failing in charity towards my neighbor." There are sins/faults/affirmations that belong with one's personal spiritual director/confessor and there are others that are very appropriate for the practice of community strengthening. There are appropriate *and inappropriate* ways of airing our beefs regarding another's annoying habits. Some comments (critical or affirmative) need to be given in an environment where feedback is possible. Other times a grace or concern may be noticed without the need for further comment. Some leaders can use a time like this for gentle formation, modeling the awareness of habits which may not be noticed by others. Other leaders can use a time like this for manipulation and control. And the line between these two is not always clear. Participants must be trained how to offer confession, accusation, and affirmation, or else damage is done to others and to the safety of the community as a whole. I think the combination of hierarchical understandings of leadership, overstereotyped conceptions of holiness, and lack of good training in how to share made the traditional chapter of faults, for many nuns, a damaging rather than a strengthening experience. The context of confession in Scripture (James 5, for example) is clearly a context of *mutual* strengthening.

3. A Proposal for Practice in Communities Today

Which brings us to a proposal for some kind of practice of confession/affirmation today. If I were to summarize the relevant core of this practice as I have explored it so far, it might be something like this:

A gathering of mutually committed Christians for the purpose of community strengthening by means of an open sharing of faults or affirmations relevant to our life together.

Let me unpack this

1. This is a gathering of *Christians*. By this I mean that love of neighbor, the fruit of the Spirit, and the desire for harmony in difference, are not unfamiliar. We share these values at the core of our very faith. The monastic life assumes the common faith of its members. Those communities who may have some members who "are not believers" will have to deal with this.

2. This is a gathering of *mutually committed* believers. We are not merely Christians, but Christians related to one another in a certain way. I will be here "with you" and "for you" no matter what you say in this gathering. I am willing to work it out over time. I'm not "out of here" when I have a problem with how things get done. This sense of mutual *commitment* gives the *freedom* for difficult things be addressed, for me to open my faults, or to express a deep appreciation at the risk that I may be misunderstood. Religious communities have addressed this with the well-known process of incorporation (postulants, novices, first and final vows). Certain meetings may or may not be for newcomers who have not made longer term commitments and who have not been trained in this kind of sharing.

3. The faults or affirmations are shared insofar as they are *relevant to life together*. Monastic communities see this in terms of using the Chapter of Faults as a place where the infractions of the common *Rule* are addressed. The community has a common set of values and life practices in the Rule that are assumed and valued by all. Some communities do not need as rigid a regulation as that prescribed by some Rules or Constitutions. Nonetheless, as members of a committed community, we all know, to one degree or another, what we expect of each other and our *community strengthening* confessions and affirmations can be evaluated in this light.

There are times and settings where the focus is on the spiritual formation of members. And this element is present in the monastic practice. There is the confessing and praying for another for the sake of the other's healing. There is the place for private confession, twelve-step support groups, small ministry prayer teams, confessors, mentors, and other forms of supportive relationship. And it is true, that the growth of individuals contributes to the health of the body in general. Nevertheless, there is also a time for sharing what is relevant for life together, and I have a suspicion that care needs to be given in order to guard and nurture this kind of a gathering/sharing for the strengthening of the community.

4. The most basic characteristic of this gathering is that it is a time of *open sharing of faults and affirmations*. We gather together. We open in prayer, in song, in sacrament, or in hearing. And then we listen. We open ourselves to one another, permitting ourselves to be moved by another. This is listening, allowing the Other (human person) to shape me/us, allowing the Other to be a vehicle of the divine Other (Spirit of God) in my/our life. It is precisely this vulnerability--in the context of mutual commitment--that offers such potential for growth and harmony. I suspect that a variety of different forms can be used to embody such a practice. One must find the form in the context of one's appropriate setting in life. That is a matter of experimentation and revision.

5. But (finally) *why* do we admit a personal fault, or mention a failing of another [which, by the way, I would only imagine as a rare thing], or share an affirmation of another? I think, in the kind of gathering I am imagining, that this sharing is done so that we all might see one another a bit more for who we are (and this is true of both confessions and affirmations), that we all might affirm who we are as a community, and that we might grow in love. We expose ourselves to this kind of vulnerability in order to strengthen the community. We strengthen one another in order to strengthen the other. We strengthen one another also in order to strengthen *one another*.

In conclusion, I am thrilled by, and concerned for, the revival of new religious life springing up

today. I am glad to see many who are giving themselves to a nurturing of community, simplicity, service, and holiness in the power of the Spirit. One practice that I suspect might contribute to the health and vitality of these communities is some form of a practice of mutual confession and affirmation. I'm not really certain what that practice might look like in different settings. Still, I offer these reflections in hopes that others will experiment and share wisdom in the years ahead.