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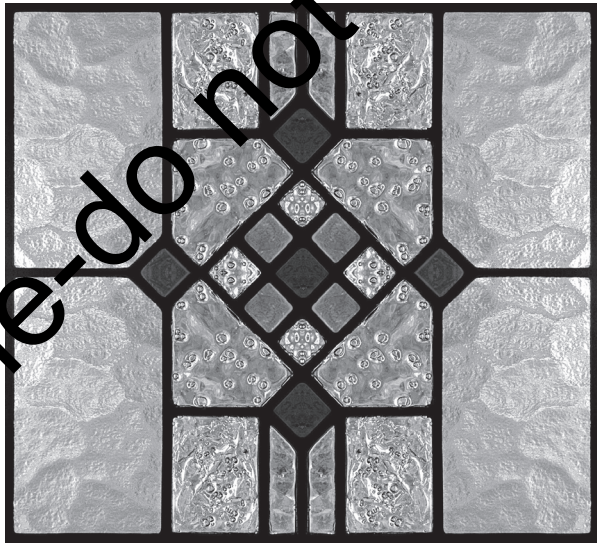
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# Introduction

## CONFESSION IS A MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

I was forty years a priest before I realized that priests don't hear sins in Confession.

We hear *ideals*. In fact, we are listening to people's mystical experiences, even though they may be conscious only of confessing their sins.

Here's an example. Suppose you accuse yourself of using bad language. There is no great revelation in that. Everybody you live or work with knows you cuss, takes it for granted, and assumes you do too. But if you mention it in Confession, the priest learns something nobody else knows: you are someone who actually disapproves of cussing; it is contrary to your personal ideals. In your heart you have a higher ideal than appears in your behavior. This is a revelation of grace — and of identity.

You need to know this. You probably feel bad about yourself because of your foul mouth. But the truth is, you can't look down on anything unless something in you has risen

above it. So what you really discover by confessing your sin — but possibly won't unless the confessor points it out to you — is that your heart is on a higher moral level than your mouth. And so are you as a person. Strange as it sounds, one of the principal reasons for confessing our sins is to realize how good we are!

To realize we have the same ideals as God is a mystical experience. If that phrase frightens you, call it an *experience of grace*. They are one and the same thing. When you become aware that you personally are judging an action the way God does — you are not just parroting what you were taught as a child, but see for yourself that it is wrong because God within you is showing you that it is — you're experiencing both the action of God in your heart and your response to God's action, God's gift of light and your acceptance of God's gift. That is a mystical experience.

## FROM RELIGION TO SPIRITUALITY

Seeing Confession this way takes it out of the box of *religion* — defined as conformity to a system of doctrines, rules, and practices — and puts it into the area of *spirituality* — experienced interaction with God.

We enter into a conscious spiritual life on the day we realize that *something is going on* between ourselves and God, and decide to get involved in it.

Our religion becomes our spirituality when we embrace its doctrines as truth revealed to us by a God we personally choose to believe in, follow its rules as guidance from a God whose way we have explicitly decided to trust, and engage

in its practices as an interchange of love with a God we consciously desire to be close to.

If our experience of Confession is not all of the above, we have not yet assimilated its meaning or fully experienced its mystery. The goal of this book is to help you use and experience Confession as an encounter that draws you closer to God.

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# The Sacrament of Self-Identity

*Experiencing oneself as a Christian*

## CONFESSION OF SIN — PROFESSION OF FAITH

The truth is that every confession of sin is more profoundly a profession of faith.

What Christians began to call the “sacrament” (“mystery”) of Reconciliation began in a very human way. Sometimes, when they were threatened with torture and death in times of persecution, Christians denied their faith. When they showed up to celebrate Eucharist again with the community after being released from prison, the other Christians did not know what to make of them.

“What are you doing here? You don’t believe in Jesus.”

“Of course I believe in Jesus. I am a Christian.”

“But you denied him. You told the Romans you did not believe in him.”

One answer to this might be, “Did you see the teeth on those lions?”

If this is the reply given by the *apostate* (from *stasis*: “standing” and *apo*: “away” — one who “stands away” from the community, takes a stance “apart from” the Church), it might well mean that, in fact, the person not only denied the faith but never had it in the first place. Anyone who does not believe we should bear witness to Jesus through the sacrifice of our life — and of every other good on earth — does not really believe in him as God, and does not accept the first and greatest commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, and with *all* your soul...” (Matthew 22:37). Such a person might fit into the group John describes:

They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us.

But by going out they made it plain that none of them belonged to us. (1 John 2:19)

However, such an answer might also mean, “Hey, I was just scared. I know I should have given up my life in witness to Jesus (the actual meaning of *martyr* in Greek is *witness*), but I was terrified. I was wrong. I was a coward. I sinned.”

In this case, the *confession of sin* would be a *profession of faith*. If the community judged it to be sincere, the apostate could be reconciled with them and accepted back into the fellowship of the believers as a participant in Eucharist.

This judgment did not happen through majority vote. It was made by the one who, as head of the community or local “church” (the word *church* means *assembly*), could speak in the name of all. That was the bishop.<sup>1</sup>

For the sake of morale, however, reconciliation was not granted until the returning apostates had given visible proof that this time their profession of faith was real. Their faith had not been strong enough to hold up against torture before; could they be believed now?

In the early Church proof of faith took the form of a long and rigorous public penance imposed by the bishop — like standing outside the door of the church in sackcloth and ashes for years or being required to live only on alms. The penance had to be completed before the bishop would grant absolution and readmit the penitent to full participation in Eucharist. If, however, during one of the times of recurring, intermittent persecution, someone who was actually imprisoned and facing death for the faith — already called a martyr — would intercede for the penitent, the penance might be mitigated or shortened. This was called an *indulgence*. An indulgence was nothing but the bishop's choice to grant relief from a penalty he himself had imposed.

And so the practice of what we now call *sacramental confession* was born.

On the one hand, it was a very human process — even a juridical one. Someone with *jurisdiction*, or the right to speak in the name of the community, judged whether the apostate's confession of sin was a sincere profession of regret based on faith, and whether the sinner, in spite of weakness, was really committed to the truth and values of Christ. Public penance was required as proof. When credibility was reestablished, the local head of the assembly, the bishop, declared the sinner freed or absolved from any obstacle to full participation in the life of the community of faith. All the other members were committed to accept his judgment. The breach was healed, unity was restored, and the morale of the community — weak-



ened by doubts about how much trust they could place in the sincerity of the communal profession of faith that bound them together — was strengthened.

## FOR THE SAKE OF COMMUNITY

We notice that the common good of the community, and not the individual's relationship to God, was the original goal of Confession in the reconciliation process. While an individual's personal and private relationship to God was certainly an issue, the main focus remained the benefit of a community's restored assurance about their common unity in faith and values. The only sins confessed were public ones that were experienced as a disruption of the *koinonía*, the experienced fellowship or "communion in the Holy Spirit" that was so important for "building up the Church" (1 Corinthians 14:12–26). At first just apostasy was confessed. Later, known murder and adultery were included.

Does this mean that the reconciliation of penitents was nothing but a matter of healing wounds in the community's morale? Was it simply a human and juridical process that served an organizational purpose?

To answer that question — and to understand Confession today — we have to go deeper into the mystery of our redemption.

## A TRIPLE MYSTERY

When the *lapsi* (those who had "lapsed" in their profession of the faith) were reconciled with the community, a mystery

was being enacted on a level deeper than outward appearance. The visible reintegration of the apostate into the community expressed an invisible reintegration into the divine life of the Body of Christ. The mystery of redemption and the mystery of sacramental reconciliation are one and the same. They are the same mystery as Baptism.

We were “saved” at Baptism by being incorporated, with all of our sins — past, present, and future — into the body of Jesus hanging on the cross. Since Jesus died almost two thousand years before we existed, this may be a confusing point. It might help if we think in terms of the difference between how we and God perceive time.

We live in *linear* time. For us, the past is over, the future does not yet exist, and only the present is real. But for God, all of time is present in one eternal “now.” Using imagery, we could say that God sees time as a circle, the way we see the moon. Every event on the circumference of the circle, from the beginning of time to the end, is present to him in one view. And at the center of the circle is the cross.

Christ’s death and rising are the timeless moment without which no moment of time has meaning, for “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created...all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16–17).

Nothing was created except in view of the final reintegration of all things in Christ.

For this reason, the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary, though it took place in time, is a timeless moment. As Priest and Victim Jesus transcends time.

He holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able *for all time* to save those

who approach God through him, since *he always lives to make intercession for them.*" (Hebrews 7:24–25)

It clarifies things to picture Jesus hanging on the cross at the center of the circle of time. Jesus died in time and space, at a point along the circumference of the circle, on the hill of Calvary outside Jerusalem, around the year 33 AD. But in reality (God's reality), his death was and is at the center of time. All human history revolves around that moment. It was in view of our redemption on Calvary that the human race was created. And every human life, no matter when it begins or ends, wherever it is positioned along the circumference of the circle, whether before or after the period of Jesus' life on earth, has the death and resurrection of Jesus as its center.

*We are all equidistant from the cross.*

When we were baptized, we were baptized "into" that body hanging on the cross at the center of time. We, with all of our sins, were incorporated into his body. As we became members of Jesus' own body, our sins became the sins of Jesus' own flesh. He "became sin" for us. "For our sakes God made him who did not know sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the very holiness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

When Jesus died, we died in him. We, with all of our sins, went down into the grave with him, and our sins were annihilated. Then we rose in him and returned to earth to take our place again on the circumference of the circle as a "new creation."

All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3–4)

## “LAMB OF GOD”

The mystery of redemption is that, in Jesus, the “Lamb of God,” our sins are not just forgiven but “*taken away*.”

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who *takes away* the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)

Because we died in Christ, no reality or record of our guilt remains. The one who committed those sins died. “If anyone is in Christ, there is a *new creation*: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead....God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, *erasing the record* that stood against us....He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. (Colossians 2:12–14)

What happened on Calvary, what happened at our Baptism, and what happens in the sacrament of Reconciliation are all the same mystery: the mystery of being taken, incorporated, or reintegrated into the body of Jesus on the cross, dying with and in him, and rising with and in him as free of all guilt as if we had never sinned in our lives.

Catholics celebrate the Immaculate Conception of Mary as the belief that the flesh of Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God, could never have been under the power of sin at any moment of its existence. This leads to the conclusion that the flesh of Mary, in order to become the flesh of God, must have been preserved from all corruption by sin from the first moment of

her conception in her mother's womb.

But if Jesus, after being born, was “made sin” by incorporating us, with all of our sins, into his body, it stands to reason that this could only be in view of overcoming sin completely by taking the “sins of the world” into his flesh in order to annihilate them.

The Church sees Mary as the “preview and promise” of the Church in its perfection. What Mary was, all of us will be when the process of redemption is complete. The perfection we see in her is a preview of our own. So Father Karl Rahner, SJ, wrote that Mary's Immaculate Conception is a sign and promise that we will all be “immaculately conceived” when our rebirth through the death and rising of our Baptism is brought to perfection at the end of our lives. Before we enter heaven, we all will be as totally and perfectly purified of all sin as if we had never, ever, sinned in our life.

Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, in order to *make her holy* by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word so as to present the Church to himself in splendor, *without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind* — yes, so that she may be *holy and without blemish*. (Ephesians 5:25–27; Colossians 1:21–22)

In our linear, earthly time frame we see Baptism as taking away all of our sins up to that moment. But in God's time frame our future sins were also annihilated in Christ's death. So in the sacrament of Reconciliation — which takes place in our linear time — we confess, we give to Christ, we include, all the sins we have committed since Baptism (or since our last Confession). But God already sees us as we will see ourselves and one another at the “end time” when Jesus presents us to himself “in splen-

dor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind...holy and without blemish." Being purified of sin in Reconciliation brings our time frame into harmony with God's.

### THE "SACRAMENTAL" ENCOUNTER

Visibly, the bishop's absolution reintegrated apostates into the human community of believers on earth. Invisibly, they were restored to live in union with Christ the Head by renewed sharing in the divine life of his mystical body on earth.

That is why Baptism and Reconciliation are called sacraments. A sacrament is an invisible interaction with God embodied in a visible interaction with human beings. God can give grace through direct, spiritual interaction with anyone, without using any created intermediaries, means, words, or gestures at all. But in Jesus, God healed, enlightened, and saved people, not only through human words and touches, but by using bread, wine, water, blood, even mud and saliva! (see John 9:6). What we call a "sacramental grace" is a grace (a life-giving "favor" from God) that comes to us through particular physical signs and visible interaction with human beings. So, in sacramental Reconciliation, union with God is restored through the visible sign of restored union with the human community of believers.

### THREE PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS

We have gone into deep theology here, which means deep mystery. On the practical level, there are three important things we should be sure we have absorbed:

## ❶ Our sins no longer exist

In Baptism and Confession, our sins are not just “forgiven” but *taken away*. The difference is crucial. With no pun intended, the “crux” of our redemption is the cross.

Forgiveness doesn’t change us. The one who forgives becomes more loving, more godlike by that act. But the one forgiven is just as guilty as before.

If Jesus only “paid the price of our sins,” our sins would still be part of us. God would just be “overlooking” them. But the truth is, we are not delivered from sin by Jesus dying *for us*, but by the mystery of *our* dying *in him*. We may not have been clear about this mystery.

That is why people do not always find peace in Confession. It may be a relief to know God doesn’t hold something against us and (if such is our understanding of God) that we will not be “punished” for what we have done. But forgiveness doesn’t change the fact that we did what we did. And if it is something that makes it hard for us to live with ourselves, we continue to carry the crushing weight of our sin.

I learned this the hard way. When I was a missionary in Africa, I killed a sixteen-year-old girl in an automobile accident. It was my fault. Obviously, I didn’t mean to kill her, so what I was technically guilty of was a “venial sin” of impatience that made me careless. However, the difference between “venial” and “mortal” sin doesn’t mean much when someone is lying dead in the road.

I duly confessed my sin and its consequence, and didn’t feel any better at all. I knew God had forgiven me, but I was still the man who killed that girl, and all the forgiveness in the world could not take that away.

For mental health reasons, I chose to put this out of my

mind for two years. Then I made a thirty-day retreat and confronted it. The first words that came to my mind were “Christ became a curse for us, hanging on the tree.” This was followed by the verse: “For our sakes God made him who did not know sin to *be sin*, so that in him we might become the very holiness of God” (see Galatians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus took me, with all of my sins, into his body on the cross. When he died, I died in him. I thought of Paul’s words: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”

I went down into the grave with Christ, as I went down into the waters of Baptism. My sins were buried with me. When Jesus rose, I rose in him, leaving my sins behind:

Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a *new creation*: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (Romans 6:3–4; 2 Corinthians 5:17)

That is the mystery of redemption — Jesus does not just forgive, he “takes away” the sins of the world. And he does it as the Lord of God, by dying and incorporating us into his death. Because we have died in Christ, there is no record of our sin, either in heaven or (in God’s eyes) on earth! The one who committed those sins *died*. We live now as the risen body of Jesus. We are a new creation. If we continue to hold on to the memory of our sins, what we are holding onto is something we have robbed from Jesus Christ. On the cross he said, “Give me your sins by giving me yourself.” He died so that we might die in him and our sins be annihilated. It is wrong to



rob him of the fruit of his passion and death by taking back the burden he died to take away.

## ② Sin and reconciliation are communal

There is always a communal dimension, both to sin and to reconciliation. We cannot sin against God without sinning against other human beings. And we cannot seek reconciliation with God without involving other human beings. “So when you are offering your gift at the altar,” Jesus says, “if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23–24). We might not like the idea of confessing our sins to the Church. But if we do not — in some form or another — we are leaving things unfinished when we confess them to God.

When we acknowledge our sins to the Church, we are reaffirming — and in that act reexperiencing, deepening, and reinforcing — our identity as co-responsible *members* of the community of faith. We are in the Church. We truly belong, and accept our belonging, as members committed to give as well as to receive. In the maturity of our relationship with other believers we recognize that we owe it to the community, as well as to God, to live in a way that makes our profession of faith credible. When we fail to do this — as all of us do to some extent — we recognize the need to *repair*. We undo the damage our sins have caused either to the community’s morale or simply to our own ability to contribute to the community’s mission. We do this through a confession of sins that is a public profession of faith. Although the actual confession is in private, the fact that we “turn ourselves in,” as my irrev-

erent cousin used to say, by going into the confessional, is a public act. And in the sacrament we confess to the priest as a representative of the community. In that act we experience our identity as believing, committed members of the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the body of Christ.

### 3 Confession is an expression and experience of faith

The real focus of Confession is not on our “works” but on our *faith*. We only confess the failure of our works in order to reaffirm — and in the process experience — the presence within us of a live faith by which we judge them. In Confession we recognize the light in our hearts when we see it revealing to us the darkness of our behavior. Therefore, we should prepare for Confession by looking at our lives in the light of the word of God and of his Spirit abiding in our hearts. What we are getting in touch with is less the reality of our sins (no great mystery there!) and more the reality of God’s enlightening, inviting, inspiring action in our hearts. Confession should be a mystical experience.

Like the disciples who met Jesus on the road after his resurrection but only recognized him “in the breaking of the bread,” we look back after the “breaking open” of our hearts and say, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road...?” (Luke 24:32).

We look back on our lives and realize, “The only reason I knew or felt that what I was doing was sin was because God was enlightening me. I have been in live contact with God. I just didn’t recognize it at the time.” That is mystical experience. It is the experience of knowing something, not because you see it with your eyes or understand it with your intellect, but because it is more real to you than that.

It may be something you were taught, something you have thought about and understand, something that “makes sense” to you. But when you get in touch with yourself, you realize you do not accept it just because it makes sense to you. Your acceptance is deeper than that. You know it on a level deeper than mere intellectual understanding. You know that this truth, this ideal, is part of you. Knowing it, believing it, and accepting it are part of what you are.

And it is part of you by grace: because of your participation in the divine life of God.

This is an experience of grace. Whether you consciously think of it that way or not, it is an experience of *sharing in the divine life of God*. By the gift of faith you are sharing in God’s own act of knowing. By the gift of hope you are setting your heart on what God holds out to you and believing it is possible; you are sharing in God’s own awareness, sharing firsthand in God’s own intention to keep his promises. And by the gift of love you love what God loves, desire what God desires, appreciate what God appreciates.

When you examine your conscience in preparation for Confession, you are really examining your *consciousness*. You are recognizing and acknowledging as your own what God is sharing with you of his own truth, his own values, his own ideals. You are discovering your true self, your deep identity, as a graced person, someone who shares in the divine light and life of God.

Your confession of sin is the act in which this is *realized* (becomes real) and is recognized by being embodied in action. What you are really revealing is your ideals. This is all about who you really are, not what you have done. The real you has a different set of ideals, reflecting your heart instead of your

lapses. This you abides with God.

Confessions are mystical experiences for the priest or confessor as well. Confessors get to hear how good people are when they think they are revealing how bad they are! To hear confessions is to perceive the action of God in the human race — God speaking to people, raising them to his level of ideals, and their responding to him. It is a very encouraging experience. It should be even more encouraging for those who realize, in the confession of their sins, how real is their profession of faith.

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