Lent, a Time for Confession

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (I John 1:8-10)

Thomas Hopko wrote in his book *The Lenten Spring* that confession is a part of the spiritual life. "There is no authentic existence for human beings without it. And there is certainly no authentic repentance."

Of all the sacraments made available to us through the church, sacramental confession is the most underused and most misunderstood. Each Lent, I write my Top Ten Lenten Suggestions and confession is always listed.

Some would argue that there is no need to do that. We have the "General Confession" we say together each time we celebrate the Holy Eucharist. But that is the point, it is general! In early times confession was open and public. The argument was and in some cases continues to be, "I can confess directly to God, I don't need a priest or a public forum."

But confession to God in secret is no confession at all but simply the acknowledgement before the Lord that we know what he knows! Confession by definition is open and public. Otherwise it is not confession. When the people queued up to repent as a means of preparing for the coming of Jesus at the preaching of John the Baptist, St. Mark says they were baptized "confessing their sins." (Mark 1:5)

They were not telling God in private what he already knew. Instead they were proclaiming the evils they had done for all to hear down by the Jordan River. St. James likewise commands that Christians "confess their sins to one another" (James 6:16). It is not a suggestion James is making but a command that as Christians we reveal our wickedness to each other so that we might be healed. Sacramental Confession is a healing sacrament: It heals the soul of those sins which weigh heavily upon it.

If confession is by definition open and public acknowledgement of sins, why then does the church direct the penitent to seek out a priest to confess in private? Priests have no power to forgive sin; only God can do that. True, but the priest's role is to witness the confession and to prescribe when necessary an appropriate penance. More importantly, the priest is present to assure God's forgiveness through the prayer of absolution. It is public in the sense that the priest represents the community of faith as the spiritual head and the sacramental presence within it of Christ himself. The sacramental priesthood is a sharing in Christ's priesthood.

Lent is a time for confession. If this would be your first confession, I suggest that you speak to someone about the proper preparation.

"Behold, my child, Christ stands here invisibly and receives your confession…I am but a witness, bearing testimony before Him of the things which you have to say. But if you shall conceal anything you shall have the greater sin. Take heed, therefore, lest having come to the physician, you depart unhealed." *(Exhortation of the confessor to the penitent in the Rite of Confession – Slavonic version)*

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