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Rest for Our Souls

Confession in an Age of Self-Esteem

by Jim Forest

Among the hottest best-sellers of the 1970s was a book that had the catchy title, *I'm Okay, You're Okay*. One of its enthusiastic readers, a young priest in Boston, gave a sermon about it that was a rave review. He wished he could give everyone he knew a copy. The book's message was simple: To love others started with loving yourself, and loving yourself meant acquiring self-esteem.

At the end of Mass, standing at the door, the priest asked one of his older parishioners how he had liked the sermon. The man wasn't eager to criticize but responded, "I haven't read the book. If what you say is true, it's better than the Bible. My only problem was that I kept thinking of Christ on the Cross saying to those who were watching him die, 'If everybody's okay, what in blazes am I doing up here?'"

The problem is I'm *not* okay, and the chances are neither are you.

I'm Okay, You're Okay was one of the pioneering books in launching the self-esteem movement, which has gone on to produce a Niagara Falls of books, magazine articles, and television shows that remind us that, to the extent that we lack self-esteem, we are unhappy, our marriages doomed, our careers stunted, while a society whose citizens are blessed with high levels of self-esteem will be more stable, more prosperous, and less troubled with anti-social or criminal behavior. In 1986 the California State Legislature even created the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility.

Stressing the Self

Unfortunately, recent studies in America and other countries suggest that self-esteem isn't delivering on its promises.

"A preoccupation with self-esteem may be inevitable in a society where self-worth is often defined by a diploma from Harvard, a size 4 dress or a mansion in Southampton," commented *New York Times* journalist Erica Goode in a report published last October. She noted that one of the findings of recent self-esteem studies is that criminals often have more self-esteem than people who are not a danger to their neighbors.

One of the researchers she quoted, Dr. Jennifer Crocker, a psychologist at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, argues that "the frantic pursuit of self-worth as measured through external trappings exacts a high personal and social toll. 'The pursuit of self-esteem has short-term benefits but long-term costs,'" says Crocker, "ultimately diverting people from fulfilling their fundamental human needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy and leading to poor self-regulation and mental and physical health."

She found that people whose sense of self-esteem is based on good looks, favorable reception of others, academic or vocational achievement, recreational performance, or similar yardsticks are actually more at risk of difficulties, relationship conflicts, aggression, and an increased likelihood of drug or alcohol dependence. In a study of 642 college freshmen, she found that students whose self-regard was based heavily on academic performance reported *more* stress and *more* conflicts with their teachers than did their peers. They spent more time studying than other students but did no better in their classes.

Jim Forest is secretary of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship and edits its quarterly journal, In Communion *(www.incommunion.org). His most recent books are* Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness *(Orbis) and* The Resurrection of the Church in Albania *(World Council of Churches, Geneva). This article is adapted from a talk given for the Fellowship of St. James in Chicago in November 2002, parts of which were drawn from his new book,* Confession.

Freshmen who invested heavily in appearing attractive reported more aggressiveness, anger, and hostility than others, more alcohol and drug use, and more symptoms of eating disorders. They also became more depressed as the year wore on. In contrast, students who judged themselves by more internal measures such as religious faith or virtue were less likely to show anger and aggression and were more restrained in their use of alcohol and drugs, even though some of them had to cope with greater feelings of loneliness for being outside the main currents of social life on campus.

While it should hardly come as headline news, Crocker's studies show that an obsession with external markers of self-worth leads to self-absorption. The correction for an exclusive focus on the self, Crocker argued, cannot be found in self-esteem classes that encourage children to believe that their personal success and happiness are of paramount importance. "Not everything is about 'me,'" she said. "There are sometimes bigger things that we should be concerned about."

> Percy's novel reminds us that one of the oddest things about the age we live in is that we are made to feel guilty about feeling guilty.

While I hardly dare imagine that publication of such a report in the *New York Times* suggests the high-water mark has been reached in the self-esteem movement, still it is encouraging to see this pseudo-gospel being challenged.

No Big Deal

A different, more intimate kind of evidence that self-esteem mania is being challenged greeted me recently at the Matthew 25 House in Akron, Ohio. The founder is Joe May, a member of Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in the same city and a graduate of Holy Cross Orthodox Seminary. In what was formerly a crack house, Joe and those who work with him take in homeless men. On the day I visited, the guests included a number of refugees from Latin America and some U.S.-born ex-convicts. In the house library there was no sign of the *I'm Okay, You're Okay* type of book, but in an adjacent bathroom, next to the mirror, was a small sign that read:

I am not a big deal.
I am not a big deal.
I am not a big deal.

Over lunch I asked what was behind this surprising message. Joe explained that during confession his priest once suggested that every morning he repeat the words "I am not a big deal" three times. Just to make sure he remembered, Joe put the text in the place where he shaves each morning.

One might also say:

I am not okay.
I am not okay.
I am not okay.

Not only am I not okay but it may well be that I will never be okay this side of heaven. In fact I am, to put it bluntly, a sinner. I am not just a sinner, but I dare to say I am an expert sinner. At age 61, I've had a lot of practice.

Forty years ago, when I was a catechumen preparing to be received into the Catholic Church, I recall what a hard struggle I had trying to understand the word "sin." I was bewildered with the idea that, if you knew God didn't want you to do something, you might do it anyway. How could any sane person consciously and intentionally disobey God?

A legalistic definition of sin, which was what my catechism provided, never quite cleared the air for me. It helped me to learn later on that the Hebrew and Greek words normally translated as "sin"—*chata'* and *hamartia*—simply mean straying off the path, losing your way, going off course. "You shoot an arrow, but it misses the target," as a rabbi once explained to me. "Maybe it hits someone's backside, someone you didn't even know was there. You didn't mean it, but still it's a sin. Or maybe you knew he was there—his backside was what you were aiming at. Now that's a sin!"

Rotten Pride

The Jewish approach to sin tends to be concrete. The author of the Book of Proverbs lists seven things that God hates: "A proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that plots wicked deeds, feet that run swiftly to evil, a false witness that declares lies, and he that sows discord among the brethren" (6:17-19).

As in so many other lists of sins, pride—that is to say, self-esteem—is given first place. "Pride goes before destruction, and a disdainful spirit before a fall" is another insight in the Book of Proverbs (16:18).

In the Garden of Eden, Satan seeks to animate pride in his dialogue with Eve. Eat the forbidden fruit, he tells her, and "you will be like a god."

Pride is regarding oneself as god-like. In one of the

stories preserved from early desert monasticism, a younger brother asks an elder, "What shall I do? I am tortured by pride." The elder responds, "You are right to be proud. Was it not you who made heaven and earth?" With those few words, the brother was cured of pride.

The craving to be ahead of others, to be more valued than others, to be more highly rewarded than others, to be able to keep others in a state of fear, the inability to admit mistakes or apologize—these are among the symptoms of pride. Pride opens the way for countless other sins: deceit, lies, theft, violence, and all those other actions that destroy community with God and with those around us.

And because we have made a god of ourselves, we think we have a blank check to do whatever we can get away with. "We're capable of doing some *rotten* things," the Minnesota storyteller Garrison Keillor remarks,

> and not all of these things are the result of poor communication. Some are the result of rottenness. People do bad, horrible things. They lie and they cheat and they corrupt the government. They poison the world around us. And when they're caught they don't feel remorse—they just go into treatment. They had a nutritional problem or something. They *explain* what they did—they don't feel bad about it. There's no guilt. There's just psychology.

So eroded is our sense of sin that even in confession it often happens that people *explain* what they did rather than admit they did things that urgently need God's forgiveness. "When I recently happened to confess about fifty people in a typical Orthodox parish in Pennsylvania," the Orthodox theologian Fr. Alexander Schmemann wrote in 1961, "not one admitted to having committed any sin whatsoever!"[1]

Facing Up to Myself

Confession is not a rite of self-esteem but is rather the recognition that there is rubbish in my life—things done and not done—that damage my connection with God and with those whom God has given me to live among, people I know and people I don't know, people I love and people I fear. Confession is facing up to all in my life that I find it painful to know about and all I struggle to keep hidden or camouflaged from those I want to love or respect me. It is a gradual return to wholeness, a return to communion, not because I have been made admirable by the church's sacraments, but because at least I am pointed in the right direction and am trying not to delude myself about how excellent I am when left to my own devices.

For the person who has committed a serious sin, there are two vivid signs: the hope that what he did may never become known and a gnawing sense of guilt. At least this is the case before the conscience becomes completely numb, as patterns of sin become the structure of one's life to the extent that hell, far from being a possible next-life experience, is where I find myself in this life. (In the film *The Pawnbroker,* in a desperate attempt to break free of numbness, the character played by Rod Steiger slams a nail-like spindle through his hand so he can finally feel something, even if the cost is agonizing pain—a small crucifixion.)

It is a striking fact about our basic human architecture that we want certain actions to remain secret, not because of modesty but because there is an unarguable sense of having violated a law more basic than that in any law book: the "law written on our hearts" that St. Paul refers to in his Letter to the Romans (2:15). It isn't simply that we fear punishment. It is that we don't want to be thought of by others as a person who commits such deeds. One of the main obstacles to going to confession is dismay that someone else will know what I want no one to know.

Sin is linked with guilt, which is one of the themes of Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins.* The central figure of the novel is Dr. Thomas More, a descendent of St. Thomas More, though the latest More is hanging on to his faith by a frayed thread. The latest More doesn't seem to be in danger of becoming a martyr for the faith. He is both a physician and a patient at a Louisiana mental hospital. From time to time he meets with his colleague Max, a secular psychologist eager to cure More of guilt.

Max tells More that they are going to condition him out of his "hang-up": his guilt feelings. He explains that More's guilt feelings have to do with adulterous sex, and More asks him if he means "my fornication with Lola." Max challenges the word because he thinks More is saying that sex is not natural. More responds:

> "No, I didn't say it wasn't natural."
> "But sinful and guilt-laden."
> "Not guilt-laden."
> "Then sinful?"
> "Only between persons not married to each other."
> "I am trying to see it as you see it."
> "I know you are."
> "If it is sinful, why are you doing it?"
> "It is a great pleasure."
> "I understand. Then, since it is 'sinful,' guilt feelings follow even though it is a pleasure."
> "No, they don't follow."
> "Then what worries you, if you don't feel guilty?"
> "That's what worries me: not feeling guilty."
> "Why does that worry you?"
> "Because if I felt guilty, I could get rid of it."
> "How?"
> "By the sacrament of penance."
> "I'm trying to see it as you see it."
> "I know you are."[2]

Inviting Communion

Percy's novel reminds us that one of the oddest things about the age we live in is that we are made to feel guilty about feeling guilty. Dr. Thomas More is fighting against that. He may not yet experience guilt for his sins, but at least he knows that a sure symptom of moral death is *not* to feel guilty.

Dr. Thomas More—a modern man who can't quite buy the ideology that there are no sins and there is nothing to feel guilty about—is battling to recover a sense of guilt, which in turn will provide the essential foothold for contrition, which in turn can motivate confession and repentance. Without guilt, there is no remorse; without remorse, there is no possibility of becoming free of habitual sins.

Yet there are forms of guilt that are dead-end streets. If I feel guilty that I have not managed to become the ideal person I occasionally want to be, or that I imagine others want me to be, my guilt has no divine reference point. It is simply me contemplating me with the eye of an irritated theater critic. That is not the sort of guilt we are supposed to feel, because it does not lead us to seek God's forgiveness.

Christianity is not centered on performance, laws, principles, or the achievement of flawless behavior, but on Christ himself and participation in God's transforming love. When Christ says, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48), he is speaking not about the perfection of a student always obtaining the highest test scores or a child who manages not to step on any of the sidewalk's cracks, but of being whole, being in a state of communion, participating in God's love.

This is a condition of being that is suggested wordlessly by St. Andrei Rublev's icon of the Holy Trinity: those three angelic figures silently inclined toward each other around a chalice on a small altar. They symbolize the Holy Trinity: the communion that exists within God, not a closed communion restricted to themselves alone but an open communion of love in which we are not only invited but intended to participate.

Perhaps we can speak of a blessed guilt: the pain we feel when we realize we have cut ourselves off from that divine communion that radiates all creation. With such a blessed guilt comes at least the beginning of a realization that whatever sins I commit, however secret, in fact have social consequences.

A Crack in the World

Dr. Thomas More at least doesn't suffer from the common delusion that one's sins are private or affect only a few other people. To think our sins, however hidden, don't affect others is like imagining that a stone thrown into the water, so long as it's small enough, won't generate ripples.

This is a topic Garrison Keillor addressed in one of his Lake Wobegone stories. A friend—Keillor calls him Jim Nurnberg—writes a letter in which he recounts how close he came to committing adultery. Nurnberg describes himself waiting in front of his home for a colleague he works with to pick him up, a woman who seems to find him much more interesting and handsome than his wife does. They plan to drive to a professional conference in Chicago, though the conference isn't really what attracts Nurnberg to this event. He knows what lies he has told others to disguise what he is doing. Yet his conscience hasn't stopped troubling him.

Sitting under a spruce tree, gazing up and down the street at all his neighbors' houses, he is suddenly struck by how much the quality of life in each house depends on the integrity of life next door, even if everyone takes everyone else for granted. "This street has been good for my flesh and blood," he says to himself. He is honest enough to realize that what he is doing could bring about the collapse of his marriage, and he wonders if in five or ten years his new partner might not tire of him and find someone else to take his place. It occurs to him that adultery is not much different from horse-trading.

Again he contemplates his neighborhood:

> As I sat on the lawn looking down the street, I saw that we all depend on each other. I saw that although I thought my sins could be secret, that they are no more secret than an earthquake. All these houses and all these families—my infidelity would somehow shake them. It will pollute the drinking water. It will make noxious gases come out of the ventilators in the elementary school. When we scream in senseless anger, blocks away a little girl we do not know spills a bowl of gravy all over a white tablecloth. If I go to Chicago with this woman who is not my wife, somehow the school patrol will forget to guard the intersection and someone's child will be injured. A sixth grade teacher will think, "What the hell," and eliminate South America from geography. Our minister will decide, "What the hell—I'm not going to give that sermon on the poor." Somehow my adultery will cause the man in the grocery store to say, "To hell with the Health Department. This sausage was good yesterday—it certainly can't be any worse today."[3]

By the end of the letter it's clear that Nurnberg decided not to go to that conference in Chicago after all—a decision that was a moment of grace not only for him, his wife, and his children, but for many others who would have been injured by his adultery.

"We depend on each other," Keillor says again, "more than we can ever know."

Far from being hidden, each sin is another crack in the world. As Bishop Kallistos Ware observed, "There are

no entirely private sins. All sins are sins against my neighbor, as well as against God and against myself. Even my most secret thoughts are, in fact, making it more difficult for those around me to follow Christ."[6]

Am I a Sinner?

One of the most widely used prayers, the Jesus Prayer, is only one sentence long: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Short as it is, many people drawn to it are put off by the last two words. Those who teach the prayer are often asked, "But must I call myself a sinner?" In fact, that ending isn't essential, but our difficulty using it reveals a lot. What makes me so reluctant to speak of myself in such plain words? Don't I do a pretty good job of hiding rather than revealing Christ in my life? Am I not a sinner? To admit that I am provides a starting point.

There are only two possible responses to sin: to justify it or to repent. Between these two there is no middle ground.

Justification may be verbal, but mainly it takes the form of repetition: I do again and again the same thing as a way of demonstrating to myself and others that it's not really a sin but rather something normal or human or necessary or even good. "After the first blush of sin comes indifference," wrote Henry David Thoreau in his essay on civil disobedience. There is an even sharper Jewish proverb: "Commit a sin twice and it will not seem a crime."

Repentance, on the other hand, is the recognition that I cannot live anymore as I have been living, because in living that way I wall myself off from others and from God. Repentance is a change in direction. Repentance is the door of communion. It is also a *sine qua non* of forgiveness. There can be no absolution where there is no repentance. Repentance, on the other hand, is the gateway to heaven. As St. John Chrysostom said sixteen centuries ago in Antioch:

> Repentance opens the heavens, takes us to Paradise, overcomes the devil. Have you sinned? Do not despair! If you sin every day, then offer repentance every day! When there are rotten parts in old houses, we replace the parts with new ones, and we do not stop caring for the houses. In the same way, you should reason for yourself: If today you have defiled yourself with sin, immediately clean yourself with repentance.

St. John Chrysostom

It is impossible to imagine a vital marriage or deep friendship without confession and forgiveness. If you have done something that damages a deep, loving relationship, confession is essential to its restoration. For the sake of that bond, you confess what you've done, you apologize, and you promise not to do it again.

We must remember that confession in church does not take the place of confession to those we have sinned against. An essential element of confession is doing all I can to set right what I did wrong. If I stole something, it must be returned or paid for. If I lied to anyone, I must tell that person the truth. If I was angry without good reason, I must apologize. I must seek forgiveness not only from God but also from those whom I have wronged or harmed.

In the context of religious life, confession is what we do to safeguard and renew our relationship with God whenever it is damaged. Confession restores our communion with God.

Confession's Purpose

The purpose of confession is not to have one's sins dismissed as non-sins but to be forgiven and restored to communion. As the Evangelist John wrote: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The Apostle James wrote in a similar vein: "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

Confession is more than the disclosure of our sins. It also involves our praise of God and profession of faith. Without the second and third elements, the first is pointless. To the extent we deny God, we reduce ourselves to accidental beings on a temporary planet in a random universe expanding into nowhere. To the extent we have a sense of the existence of God, we discover creation confessing God's being and see all beauty as a confession of God.

We discover that faith is not so much something we *have* as something we *experience*—and we confess that experience much as glass confesses light. The Church calls certain saints "confessors" because they confessed their faith in periods of persecution even though they did not suffer martyrdom as a result. In dark, fear-ridden times, the faith shone through martyrs and confessors, giving courage to others.

In his autobiography, *Confessions*, St. Augustine drew on all three senses of the word. He confessed certain sins, chiefly those that revealed the process that had brought him to baptism and made him a disciple of Christ and member of the Church. He confessed his faith. His book as a whole is a work of praise, a confession of God's love.

But it is the word's first meaning—confession of sins—that is usually the most difficult. It is never easy admitting to doing something you regret and are ashamed of, an act you attempted to keep secret or denied doing or tried to blame on someone else, perhaps arguing—to yourself as much as to others—that it wasn't actually a sin at all, or wasn't nearly as bad as some people might claim. In the hard labor of growing up, one of the most agonizing tasks is becoming capable of saying, "I'm sorry."

Confessing sins, or even temptations, makes us better able to resist.

Yet we are designed for confession. Secrets in general are hard to keep, but unconfessed sins not only never go away but have a way of becoming heavier as time passes—the greater the sin, the heavier the burden. Confession is the only solution.

The Sacrament

Still, there are nagging questions. Why is the Church involved in forgiving sins? Is priest-witnessed confession, such as one still finds in Orthodox and Roman Catholic practice, really needed? Why confess at all to any human being? In fact, why bother confessing to God even without a human witness? After all, if God is really all-knowing, surely he already knows everything about me. God knows my sins even before it crosses my mind to confess them. Why bother telling God what God already knows?

Yes, truly God knows. My confession can never be as complete or revealing as God's knowledge of me.

Perhaps it helps to consider our basic design as social beings. Why am I so willing to connect with others in every other area of life, yet not in this? Why is it that I look so hard for excuses, even for theological rationales, *not* to confess to others that I've harmed them? Why do I try so hard to explain away my sins until I've decided either they're not so bad or might even be seen as acts of virtue? Why is it that I find it so easy to *commit* sins yet am so reluctant, in the presence of another, to admit to having done so?

We are social beings. The individual as autonomous unit is a delusion. The Marlboro Man—the person without community, parents, spouse, or children—exists only on billboards. The *individual* is someone who has lost a sense of connection to others or attempts to exist in opposition to others—while the *person* exists in communion with other persons. At a conference of Orthodox Christians in France not long ago, in a discussion of the problem of individualism, a theologian confessed, "When I am in my car, I am an individual, but when I get out, I am a person again."

We are social beings. The language we speak connects us to those around us. The food I eat was grown by others. The skills passed on to me have slowly been developed in the course of hundreds of generations. The air I breathe and the water I drink is not for my exclusive use but has been in many bodies before mine. The place I live, the tools I use, and the paper I write on—all were made by many hands. I am not my own doctor or dentist or banker. To the extent I disconnect myself from others, I am in danger. Alone I die, and soon. To be in communion with others is life.

We are also verbal beings. Words provide a way of communicating not only with others but even with ourselves. The fact that confession is witnessed forces me to put into words all those ways, minor and major, in which I live as if there were no God and no commandment to love. A thought that is concealed has great power over us.

Confessing sins, or even temptations, makes us better able to resist. The underlying principle is described in one of the collections of sayings of the Desert Fathers, the *Gerontikon*:

> If impure thoughts trouble you, do not hide them, but tell them at once to your spiritual father and condemn them. The more a person conceals his thoughts, the more they multiply and gain strength. But an evil thought, when revealed, is immediately destroyed. If you hide things, they have great power over you, but if you could only speak of them before God, in the presence of another, then they will often wither away, and lose their power.

Confessing to anyone, even a stranger in an airport, renews rather than contracts my humanity, even if all I get in return for my confession is the well-worn remark, "Oh that's not so bad. After all, you're only human"—something like the *New Yorker* cartoon in which a psychologist reassures a Mafia contract killer stretched out on the couch, "Just because you do bad things doesn't mean you're bad."

But if I can confess to anyone anywhere, why confess in church in the presence of a priest? It's not a small question in societies in which the phrase "institutionalized religion" is so often used as a criticism, the implicit message being that religious institutions necessarily impede or undermine religious life. Yet it's not a term we seem inclined to adopt as a criticism in other contexts. Few people would prefer we got rid of institutionalized health care or envision a world without institutionalized transportation. Whatever we do with more than a few people requires structures.