

Tract 14: Confession

Confession as Natural

When it comes to sacramental participation, the bad news is everywhere. For example, a poll for 2007 determined that 75 percent of American Catholic went to the sacrament of reconciliation less than once a year, or never.¹ Given the sacrament's bad press—"Catholic guilt-tripping!"—and the universal mental barrier against discussing personal failings with someone else, it is not surprising that people have fled the confessional. Indeed, the wonder may be that people approached it in such numbers for so long.

And yet there is a great irony in our abandonment of this sacrament that seems so unnatural. The irony is that we are made to confess; it is built into our nature. In this sense, we are all daily confessants. These ordinary confessions happen in two ways: bodily and verbally.

Our bodies manifest ourselves constantly, whether asleep or awake. In fact, this constant confession is the one thing our bodies do perfectly, all the time, no matter our health or fitness. From the first moment of our life to our last breaths, our bodies continually make visible the persons that we are. While keeping us alive, and therefore in being—as Aristotle tells us, the "being" of living things "is to live"—the larger reason for our bodies is precisely this constant, personal confession.² As Pope John Paul II argued, "The body expresses the person."³ The body's constant determination to reveal the invisible is one reason why the Pope said that the human body has a "quasi-sacramental" character.

¹ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, "Fewer Catholics Participating in Reconciliation," *The Cara Report* 12, no. 4 (Spring 2007).

² *De anima* 2.4.415b13.

³ John Paul II, General Audience of October 31, 1979, in *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 154.

By expressing the person, the human body also speaks what Augustine heard the whole of creation confessing, shortly after his conversion: *He made me! He made me!*⁴ This ongoing confession of limitation and ontological dependence points to the infinite and purely simple God, who made us not because he needed any addition to himself, but only out of love. The gratuity of the world is a constant confession of the Creator.

Thirdly, our bodies, as sexed, confess that we are ordered to another; no one can procreate alone. The Second Vatican Council emphasizes in *Gaudium et Spes* that “man can only find himself through a sincere gift of self” (§24). As existing as male or female, each human body confesses this orientation to self-gift to another. We are made for love.

Of course, the fact that our bodies confess in this triple way does not mean that anyone is hearing the confessions. Our ability to hear the language of creation has been damaged by sin, and our bodies seem to speak instead of very different things, of compulsion and danger and disease. Yet beneath this angry and fearful language is the original voice of creation as it confesses persons, human and divine, and the need for love.

The second way we daily confess is through the human ability to use language. We put into words what we are feeling, believing, hoping—all of this constantly. Those who cannot speak gesture. Those who cannot gesture speak with their eyes. Babies ache to make themselves understood. The mystery of human language is profound and almost divine. Indeed, it is a mystery that has its source in the deepest origin of the Trinitarian persons: the Father speaking all that he can say, the whole divine essence, in his one and only Word, both of them the source and somehow also the recipient of the gift of eternal Love. This is the primordial, divine confession.

The concrete reality of these mysterious, constant, human confessions can be, however, something quite different from their Trinitarian origins. Both the bodily and the verbal confessions can be disrupted—often, it should be noted, for good purposes. We can smile when we would rather frown. We can say a kind word when our interior monologues are quite different. But, more morally serious, we can refuse to speak the truth, using language to obfuscate rather than manifest the truth. Words, precisely because they are the uppermost edge of the depth of rationality, are supported by the tremendous potency of the intellect. They can be great tools of a will to power.

In contrast, the body’s natural confession, because it is tied to the other sub-rational animals, is therefore more difficult to disrupt through reason

⁴ Augustine, *Confessiones* 9.10.25, trans. Maria Boulding, 2nd ed. (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2012), 228.

than is linguistic confession. No matter how much I may wish it, my body cannot naturally confess me to be a six-foot-tall man if I am a five-foot-tall woman. My body constantly “tells on me,” without my express permission. This stubborn consistency in revealing the truth about oneself is probably why the body has been such a lightning rod for technological manipulation.

Our age is one that finds comfort in the simulacrum and the avatar, an age in which appearances are detached from and elevated beyond the reality they are meant to express. The natural continuity of confession, from interior to expression, is severed to relocate the appearance to its own endlessly manipulable plane, cut off from any confessional purpose. The point is no longer to manifest the truth, but to win admiration, to influence others, or for any number of other, self-chosen ends. What does it matter if my smiling photo on social media hides the fact that I was actually miserable on that vacation? Self-curation of one’s image wins out over the simplicity of natural confession.

Yet the natural anchors that the body and language have to the truth cannot be simply uprooted. Surrounded by simulacra and empty images, we instinctively sense that only the truth is solid and safe. Untruth leaves one exposed to the malice of others, to be manipulated just as words are. No one likes to be lied to. As ambivalent as I may be about my own confession, I want others to be truthful with me.

Attempts at Confession

Given this bias toward truth, the uncomfortable question forces itself forward: When, if ever, do I tell the simple truth in deeds and words? How, in fact, can I even proceed with such a project? To answer this, let us look at two archetypes of confession, consciously understood as such by their authors. I will begin with the later example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his *Confessions*, deconstructively modeled on Augustine’s book of the same name.

Despite being written almost fourteen hundred years after Augustine’s, Rousseau’s *Confessions* are, the Frenchman insists, *sui generis*. “I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself.”⁵ The reason, therefore, that his book is inimitable is that there never was and never will be another Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the central object as well as the authorial

⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, trans. J. M. Cohen (New York: Penguin, 1953), 17.

subject of his confession. The key phrase “true to nature” tells us everything. “Nature” does not refer only to Rousseau’s humanity but even more so to his authentic core. Authenticity is the criterion for confessing, according to Rousseau.

Much of Rousseau’s confessional style is appealing to us moderns. Lurid memoirs are regular landmarks in the geography of digital anonymity, which exists without boundaries or passports. Internet narratives of identity (often sexual in nature) are all narratives of authenticity. In this regard, Rousseauian confession is much imitated.

Yet Rousseau cannot give a good answer to a central question: How can I know what is authentically *me*? Lacking any conceptual verification, he turns to an emotional one: my private feelings. It is me because I feel myself to be so. Thus, I am myself. $X = X$. Any thoughtful person will see how little Rousseau is actually saying here, how unhelpful he is for any existential crisis. More, this criterion of authenticity will always be a retroactive baptism of one’s life choices, rather than any substantive challenge to them. Thus, while appearing to demand a costly honesty, Rousseauian confession is just cheap grace.

Against such authenticity-confession, Augustine gives us a model of confession as *Confitebor tibi, Domine*: I will confess to you, oh Lord. In his *Confessions*, Augustine does not speak primarily to his contemporaries, nor to the admiring posterity, and certainly not to himself, but to God. He will relate much later: “The thirteen books of my *Confessions* concern both my bad and my good actions, for which they praise our just and good God. In so doing they arouse the human mind and affections toward him.”⁶ Augustine’s criterion for confession is not a vicious circle of authenticity, but instead the Word who is Truth.

In book 8, Augustine relates how others’ confessions moved him. The well-known Platonist Victorinus converted and then confessed the Christian creed in public, “to proclaim his salvation before the holy company. . . . As he climbed up to repeat the Creed they all shouted his name to one another in a clamorous outburst of thanksgiving. . . . Then in more subdued tones the word passed from joyful mouth to joyful mouth among them all: ‘Victorinus, Victorinus!’”⁷ Augustine saw something universal in Victorinus’s conversion, because the latter “preferred to abandon his school of talkativeness [teaching rhetoric] rather than forsake your word, through which you impart

⁶ *Retractiones* 2.6.32, in *Confessions* (Boulding trans.), 36.

⁷ *Confessiones* 8.2.5 (p. 189).

eloquence to the tongues of speechless babes.”⁸ In ascending to his place of confession, Victorinus showed Augustine, his fellow rhetor, the proper ascent of language.

Augustine can speak of and to God because God first spoke: “Let us make man according to our image” (Gen 1:26). From the details of his life on the micro-level to the truth of temporal, material, and spiritual creation as expressed in Genesis on the macro-level, Augustine’s rehearsing of God’s creative speech is a confession that gives back to God his own divine words, a tiny participation in Christ’s great mediatory work.

Dominical Confession

Augustine’s confessions, therefore, are not self-verified in a circular way by their authenticity, but by their prior dependence upon God’s confessional speech. This confession reaches us through creation—“by the word of the Lord the heavens were made” (Ps 33:6)—and through the human person’s *imago*-nature. The human *imago* reflects the primordial divine confession, as we saw above, of the Father confessing all truth as his Word in the Holy Spirit.

But, as Augustine so clearly saw, his *imago*-nature’s bidirectional confession (in flesh and in word) was disrupted and contaminated by sin. The originary divine confession becomes distant and silent to sinful man, who cannot hear it. Hence the need for a mediator to speak it to us, the God-man, Christ. As Word made flesh, Jesus divinizes the natural human modes of confession. More, he mends their internal fractures between truth and expression. He is the Truth (John 14:6) who confesses with his human mouth, in human words, all that the Father has spoken in him (John 12:49), and he gives us the possibility of doing the same.

This is the context for the sacrament of confession. Adrienne von Speyr proposes that the dominical institution of the sacrament occurred in a particularly intense way on the Cross. Jesus’s wordless cry was *his* confession of all *our* sins, the perfect confession that every sacramental confession distantly imitates.⁹ On the Cross, Jesus confesses the sins of others, through word and flesh, fulfilling superabundantly our natural confessions of language and body. This superabundant fulfillment is itself a sacrament, that of reconciliation.

⁸ *Confessiones* 8.5.10 (p. 192).

⁹ Adrienne von Speyr, *Confession*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), and *The Cross: Word and Sacrament*, trans. Graham Harrison, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018).

Sacramental Confession

Confession in this sense is our insertion into the truthfulness of the Word made flesh. We must tell him, through the priest who serves in his place, what he already knows and has confessed to the Father, namely, the truth of ourselves.

In his book *Till We Have Faces*, C. S. Lewis captures the transformational nature of hearing ourselves speak the truth about ourselves. His protagonist has written a book of accusations against the gods, but when she reads it out loud in a dream, the book shrinks, and she hears herself repeating the same resentful narratives. “Now I knew that I had been reading it over and over—perhaps a dozen times. . . . And the voice I read it in was strange to my ears. There was given to me a certainty that this, at last, was my real voice.”¹⁰

Sacramental confession is the opportunity to hear one’s own true voice, which is inevitably petty and pathetic, and maybe even malicious and sadistic. I the penitent hear it, and also—in the priest as Christ’s representative—humanity hears it, the Church hears it, and the triune God hears it. In the most discreet way possible, protected by the seal of the confessional, my sins are made “public.” And as soon as they are so publicized, they are forgotten by the words of absolution. “He that hides his sins shall not prosper, but he that shall confess, and forsake them, shall obtain mercy” (Prov 28:13).¹¹ I can face humanity, the Church, and God with a clear conscience once more.

Confession heals the wounds of bodily and linguistic expression and returns to me the possibility of living according to the law of love, which is also the law of truth. Rather than Rousseau’s self-referential circle, this is true authenticity: who I the sinner am now, versus who God wishes me to be, normed by God’s criterion rather than by my shifting self. The demanding nature of the law of truthful love (or loving truth) is why the saints have eager recourse to this sacrament, knowing how badly, without grace, they would imitate the transparency of God who is Loving Truth eternally spoken.

We have been dwelling on just one aspect of the sacrament, namely, confession as a human and divine requirement. The whole sacramental context extends to contrition prior to the sacramental confession and satisfaction for one’s sins after it (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1450). The sacrament’s concern is the mending of a whole life in the light of God’s mercy. It should lead to a life of penance for sin, mine and others, and in

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Novel of Cupid and Psyche* (New York: Mariner, 1984), 292.

¹¹ Quoted by Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 84, a. 7, ad 2.

this sense, penance is a virtue as well as a sacramental act.¹² Confession is a way of life.

The example of Thomas Aquinas is instructive. After his late mystical experience, he broke off his work on the *Summa theologiae*. When asked why, he famously responded that it seemed like so much straw, compared to what had been revealed to him. It is significant that the treatise Thomas had been writing at the time was on the sacrament of penance. Perhaps we can understand his experience as his hearing God's great confession of divine glory, which cannot but also confess the smallness of man in comparison. After this divine confession, what was left to Thomas except to spend the rest of his life immersing his own words in the merciful ocean of the Word? And this is precisely what the sacrament enables us all to do. N.V

¹² ST III, q. 85.