



Doorway of Forgiveness

by Jim Forest; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002; 174 pp, \$15; ISBN 1-570-75-386-5

Once a defining feature of Christian life, the practice of confession was abandoned by many people in the last few decades of the twentieth century, but now is coming back to life with the recognition that, without an acknowledgment of sin and the longing for forgiveness and reconciliation, the Gospel makes little sense. **In 'Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness,' Jim Forest offers a moving and helpful reappraisal of this neglected sacrament, drawing on history, scripture, the lives of the saints and a wealth of personal stories.**

best single book I have seen on a sacrament which is widely misunderstood. In this accessible and very helpful book, Forest places the sacrament of reconciliation solidly at the center of Christian tradition. I can imagine no better introduction." -- Fr. John Garvey, author of *Orthodoxy for the Non-Orthodox* "The mysteries of repentance, confession and forgiveness are at the core of Christianity. Jim Forest retrieves these powers for us at a time when confession and forgiveness are as necessary as air and water are for humankind to survive. *Confession* is a treasure to mine and practice." -- Megan McKenna, author of *Prophets* Jim Forest is the author of several award-winning books, including and *Living With Wisdom: A Biography of Thomas Merton*. He lives in the Netherlands. *Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness* is available from Orbis Books in the US and Alban Books in the UK.

Here are a few chapters...

Introduction

The tradition of confession, once common practice among Christians, fell on hard times but is today making a comeback. While confession is most easily found in the Orthodox Church, Catholics are increasingly finding their way back to this ancient practice. In Protestant churches various forms of spiritual guidance and counseling are on the rise, perhaps paving the way for the recovery of a lost sacrament. It seems likely that in another generation sacramental confession will not be so rare an event as it is today in the life of an ordinary Christian.

The purpose of this small book is to help revive confession where it has been abandoned or neglected, to help the reader prepare a better confession, and to help those who hear confessions better serve as Christ's witness, taking care not to impede the sacrament's healing strength. It is written by an Orthodox Christian who hopes it will be beneficial not only to Orthodox readers but also to Catholic and Protestant Christians.

Perhaps it is useful to say something about what led me to write a book on confession and what gives the book a broad Christian focus.

Growing up on the edge of a New Jersey town, Red Bank, my scattered childhood encounters with Christianity were chiefly with various forms of Protestantism in which sacramental confession didn't exist. Confession was among the "Romish" rituals long since rejected by those churches which had freed themselves from "the corruptions of Catholicism," a phrase that was not uncommon among Protestants in those days of religious cold war. In anti-Catholic remarks I occasionally heard, confession was described as a way Catholic priests deprived those who entered confessionals of their freedom. My Uncle Charles, who believed the Catholic clergy longed to resume the torture and burning of heretics, was convinced that confession was too easy: "It's the usual Catholic hocus pocus. You just confess what you did and you're in the clear to do it again and again and again." I heard from Protestants, "If you have something to confess, confess it to God directly, and God will forgive you. No priest is needed." (Yet later in life I came to know Protestants, some of them pastors, who were deeply burdened with the memory of past sins, had yet to experience God's forgiveness, and wished this dimension of sacramental life had not been thrown away in the age of Reformation. Truly it was a case of throwing out the baby with the bath water.)

When Protestant friends invited me to their churches, I went quite willingly but was disinclined to memorize the Ten Commandments and found sermons infinitely boring. Sometimes I enjoyed the singing but too often churches seemed like classrooms without blackboards. It was only when I was invited by a classmate to an Episcopal church at which there was a communion service every Sunday that I found myself powerfully drawn to Christianity. While I would walk a mile out of my way to avoid a sermon, a sacrament-centered form of Christianity drew me with the force of gravity. It was in this old church, where soldiers wounded in the Revolutionary War had bled and died, that I was baptized at the age of twelve. The priest, Fr. Levan, gave me a special gift that day, an ancient Byzantine coin, on one side of which was impressed the icon of Christ's haloed face -- my first encounter with the imagery of the Orthodox Church.

So far as I was aware, there was no practice of confession within the parish, but in other respects it was a very traditional form of Christianity I encountered at Christ Episcopal Church in the village of Shrewsbury just south of Red Bank. Thanks to the parish priest, I was made conscious of Christianity's origins in the eastern Mediterranean. It was in this solidly American Protestant community that I learned fragments of Greek, understanding that "Eucharist" meant "thanksgiving," "liturgy" meant "public work," and "Kyrie eleison" meant "Lord, have mercy."

That first period of church involvement lasted little more than a year. The main part of my teenage years was spent outside churches with no thought of sacraments or interest in the Bible. In my adolescent mind, Christianity became something for children and unadventurous adults. Nature was sacrament enough. Having moved to California, I took to the coastline and the mountains, biking and climbing during vacations, doing odd jobs, often sleeping under the stars. If there is a God, I thought, I will search for him by myself in the wilderness.

Later, out of high school and in the Navy, stationed in Washington, D.C., my religious search brought me back to Christianity. For half a year I was part of an Episcopal parish though visiting not only other Protestant churches but various Catholic churches as well. Having found myself most challenged both intellectually and spiritually by the Catholic Church, I started a course of instruction and in November 1960 became a Catholic, at the same time going to confession for the first time. Confession has ever since been an ordinary -- but never easy -- part of my life.

Two decades later, then living in Europe, my work took me to Moscow for a small theological conference hosted by the Russian Orthodox Church. In those days, the Soviet Union was showing no signs of giving up the ghost. The "iron curtain" was very solid and Communist symbols and slogans rarely out of sight once behind the curtain. While for twenty years I had occasionally read books and magazine articles about the Orthodox Church, the last thing I expected was that I was heading toward a life-changing encounter with Orthodox Christianity.

According to all I had read, the Orthodox Church in Russia was an ever-shrinking band of unlettered old women. True, old women were the majority in the church, but what old women! It was chiefly thanks to them that my vague interest in "Eastern" Christianity abruptly became far more intense. Attending the liturgy in one of Moscow's few open churches, I was overwhelmed by the climate of prayer generated by the worshipers -- in my experience, only the black church in America came close. Seven years and

many trips later, my wife and I were received into the Orthodox Church at a parish in Amsterdam, St. Nicholas of Myra.

I wasn't a "convert," I explained to bewildered Catholic friends at the time. I was only changing my address. The main event, my conversion to Christ, had started much earlier in my life. But nowhere else in Christianity had I experienced such depth and fervor of eucharistic life, such an intensity of prayer, such continuity of teaching, such a healthy capacity to resist passing ideological and theological fashions. For all of Orthodoxy's shortcomings -- its "national churches," its jurisdictional rivalries, the inattention of so many Orthodox Christians to urgent social issues -- I found it impossible not to be part of the Orthodox Church. Yet I felt and still feel a strong bond with the Catholic Church and a connection with anyone, no matter what his or her church, who is trying to follow Christ.

More than two-thirds of my life have now been spent in churches in which confession is recognized as a sacrament, even though in the Catholic Church it has been a sacrament in decline for the past quarter century, at least in North America and Western Europe.

In Holland, my home since 1977, I have yet to find a Catholic parish where confession is a visible part of church life. A few years ago I visited a large Catholic church near Utrecht erected in the fifties, a period of optimism about the community's future sacramental needs. Six confessionals had been built into its brick walls, but it had been years since a priest had sat in any of them. Each was being used as a closet -- cleaning supplies in two of them, Mass booklets in another, candles in the next, assorted odds and ends in the last two, including a discarded Sacred Heart of Jesus statue.

One Dutch Catholic priest who avidly hoped for the sacrament's revival was the late Henri Nouwen, whom I had come to know when he was teaching at Yale. While in the Netherlands for a family visit in the early eighties, he took me one weekday morning to meet an elderly priest whom Henri admired both for his translations of the writings of Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross and because he was a good confessor. After being introduced in the church sacristy, I left the two of them alone so that Henri could make his confession. Half an hour later Henri reappeared, telling me with dismay that this was the first time in seven years that anyone had come to the pastor for such a purpose. "Can you imagine? Here is a man with a vocation not only to be a channel of God's forgiveness but also to give spiritual direction and wisdom. But no one wants it. It is like a town with a beautiful fountain that everyone ignores." I had rarely heard such grief in Henri's voice.

Yet even today there are Catholic churches with confessionals very much in use. Because my work often took me to London, in the years before becoming Orthodox I confessed regularly at that city's main Catholic church, Westminster Cathedral. Once, while in Rome for a meeting with Pope John Paul in 1980, I confessed at St. Peter's in one of the many confessionals in the back of that vast church. Last summer, while in England for an ecumenical conference, I visited a large and thriving parish in Birmingham, the Oratory, founded in the nineteenth century by Cardinal John Henry Newman. Here there were half-a-dozen confessionals standing ready for use. (Among those who attended Mass and went to confession at the Oratory in an earlier time was J.R.R. Tolkien when he was growing up. His *Lord of the Rings* trilogy has at its core one hobbit's struggle not to let temptation get the upper hand, a theme not unfamiliar to anyone going to confession.)

The vitality of confession in the Orthodox Church was not a decisive factor in my becoming Orthodox, yet I was always inspired when watching people confess in Orthodox parishes: priest and penitent standing before an icon of Christ, the person confessing toward the icon rather than the priest.

I was gradually to learn that the tradition of confession in the Orthodox Church was not only superficially different -- standing rather than kneeling, in public view rather than hidden -- but there is often a difference in emphasis. The geography of the ritual helped make it clear it was Christ who was being addressed by the person confessing and that the priest was chiefly a witness. There was a sense of familial intimacy in the closeness of penitent and priest standing so close to each other. Earlier in my life I had understood confession mainly as the listing of sins of which I was guilty. In the Orthodox Church I encountered a different emphasis: an attempt to identify what I had done that broke communion with God and my neighbor. It was a lesson I might have learned as a Catholic but I hadn't.

Little by little I came to better understand the great care one often notices in Orthodox parishes as believers prepare to receive communion -- the awareness that communion with Christ requires being in a state of communion with those around us, and that it is a sin to go to the chalice if you are in a state of enmity.

Confession in One Parish

Orthodox parishes being relatively few in Holland and many of us living some distance away from our parish church, I am among those who go to confession before the liturgy on Sunday mornings rather than after Vespers Saturday night.

As is **the Orthodox custom**, confession usually occurs in a corner of the church not far from the altar. There is a narrow tilted stand on which are placed a New Testament and a cross. On the wall over the stand, illuminated by the flickering light of a *lampada* (an oil lamp), is an icon of Christ the Savior. Those wanting to confess stand in line, leaving enough space at the front so that the person confessing has a degree of privacy. While confession is going on, normally a reader recites psalms and prayers in the center of the church, thus preventing confessions from being audible.

Often the first person in line is Zacharia, a large, round-faced Ethiopian woman of a grandmotherly age with a faded cross tattooed on her forehead. The priest receives her, as he does all penitents, by reciting words that remind her that he is only a witness to the confession about to be made and that it is Christ the physician, invisibly present, who heals and forgives. Zacharia speaks little Dutch, still less English, and not a word of Russian, Greek, or German -- thus no language that any of our priests understands. It doesn't matter. She stands before the icon of Christ, her upraised hands rising and falling rhythmically, relating in her incomprehensible mother tongue whatever is burdening her. As the priest grasps not a word of what she is saying, he does nothing more than quietly recite the Jesus Prayer until Zacharia is finished. Then she kneels down while he places the lower part of his priestly stole over her head and recites the words of absolution:

"May our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, by the grace and compassion of his love for man, pardon all your faults, child Zacharia, and I, the unworthy priest _____, by his authority given me, pardon and absolve you of all your sins: in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

With these last words, he traces the sign of the cross on the head of this African woman who misses the liturgy only if ill. Then Zacharia rises, turns to face him, and receives a final blessing before the next person comes forward and the confessions continue.

Those in the line are men and women in approximately equal numbers. They come in all ages and sizes, from children to the aged. The only difference from the first confession is that in most cases the priest understands the language being spoken and thus can ask the occasional question and offer words of advice or encouragement before giving absolution.

There are those who whisper so quietly that probably the priest can hardly hear them, others who speak so loudly that those standing nearby are likely to murmur aloud their own prayers so as not to overhear what is being confessed. Some confess at length, some briefly. Some confess with their hands hanging at their sides while the hands of others articulate as much as words all that is being said. Occasionally the penitent weeps more than

speaks, confessing mainly in tears. The sobs travel from one side of the church to the other and for some in the church prove contagious, one grief awakening others. With those whose pain is overwhelming, **the priest often rests a reassuring hand on their shoulder.**

Parents often bring infants and children with them when they confess. On a recent Sunday I noticed Fr. Sergei Ovsianikov, rector of our parish, hearing a young mother's confession while holding her baby in his arms.

The frequency of confession varies dramatically from person to person. A few confess almost each week, some once a month, still others a few times in the course of a year. Only a small portion of the parish confesses on a given weekend. Even so, it is a big job for our priests. On Sunday mornings, one or two of them will be hearing confessions beginning about twenty minutes before the service begins, with one of them sometimes still hearing confessions through the first half of the liturgy, until it is nearly time for communion. It's not the ideal practice for confession to occur during the liturgy, but with many people coming long distances and sometimes experiencing delays along the way, the priests do their best to open the pathway to communion.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels a warm breeze entering the church from the corner where confessions are going on.

This is a scene repeated in Orthodox churches around the world, though details in practice vary from nation to nation. The Slavic wing of the Orthodox Church -- our parish is linked to the Church in Russia -- is noted for frequency of confession, the Greek wing less so, yet periodic confession is seen as an essential element of sacramental life even in those churches where it is less commonly used.

A Word of Thanks

Every book is a work of community. My thanks to all who read parts of the manuscript along the way and whose comments helped make it better, especially Barbara Allaire, Fr. Lawrence Barriger, Fr. Ted Bobosh, Alice Carter, Tom Cornell, Fr. Yves Dubois, Sr. Nonna Harrison, Ioana Novac, Fr. Sergei Ovsianikov, Fr. Pat Reardon, Fr. Michael Plekon, Karen Rae Keck, Shannon Robinson, Daniel Scuiry, Michael Sersch, Deacon John Sewter, Fr. James Silver, Nilus Stryker, Sue Talley, Mary Taylor, Fr. Steve Tschlis, Fr. John Udies, Fr. Alexis Vinogradov, Bishop Kallistos Ware, and Renee Zitzloff. I wish I could place a copy of this book in the hands of the late Henri Nouwen, from whom I learned a great deal about confession. He would be pleased to see that Rembrandt's Prodigal Son painting graces the cover of

this book as it did one of his last books, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Finally, a word of profound appreciation to my editor and friend, Robert Ellsberg, and equally to my wife, Nancy. Without them this book would never have reached your hands.

Hoping that one day there will be a revised edition of this book, I invite any who read it to send me, care of the publisher or via e-mail <alkmaar123@cs.com>, any suggestions, insights, or criticisms with regard to this book and also to share stories or experiences of confession that might be useful to others. In the case of private experiences of confession, names will not be published. (Perhaps in the meantime some of these responses and corrections can be posted on our web site

<http://www.incommunion.org/home.htm>

Jim Forest

The Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, 2001

[first chapter of Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness by Jim Forest]

A Three-Letter Word ... Sin

Sin has always been an ugly word, but it has been made so in a new sense over the last half-century. It has been made not only ugly but passé. People are no longer sinful, they are only immature or underprivileged or frightened or, more particularly, sick. -- Phyllis McGinley, The Province of the Heart, "In Defense of Sin"

What is failure? Failure is what people do ninety-nine percent of the time. Even in the movies: ninety-nine outtakes for one print. But in the movies they don't show the failures. What you see are the takes that work. So it looks as if every action, even going crazy, is carried off in a proper, rounded-off way. It looks as if real failure is unspeakable. TV has screwed up millions of people with their little rounded-off stories. Because that is not the way life is. Life is fits and starts, mostly fits. -- Walker Percy, The Thanatos Syndrome

There is no need to preach constantly on "sin," to judge and to condemn. It is when a man is challenged with the real contents of the Gospel, with its Divine depth and wisdom, beauty and all embracing meaning, that he becomes "capable of repentance," for true repentance is precisely the discovery by the man of the abyss that separates him from God and from His real offer to man. It is when the man sees the bridal chamber adorned that he realizes that he has no garment for entering it. -- Fr. Alexander Schmemmann

A best-selling book of the 1970s had the title *I'm Okay, You're Okay*. One of its readers, a young priest in Boston, gave a sermon which was essentially a

rave review. He wished he could give everyone a copy of the book. At the end of Mass, standing at the door, he asked one of his older parishioners if he had liked the sermon. The man responded, "I haven't read the book -- maybe it's better than the Bible. But 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 neither are you.

There have been thousands of essays and books in recent decades which have dealt with human failings under various labels without once using the one-syllable, three-letter word that has more bite than any of its synonyms: sin. Actions traditionally regarded as sinful have instead been seen as natural stages in the process of growing up, a result of bad parenting, a consequence of mental illness, an inevitable response to unjust social conditions, pathological behavior brought on by addiction, or even as "experiments in being." Sin, we've also been told, is an invention of repressed, hypocritical clerics who want to keep the rest of us in bondage -- "priests in black robes binding with briars our joys and desires," in the chiming syllables of William Blake.

But what if I am more than a robot programmed by my past or my society or my economic status and actually can take a certain amount of credit -- or blame -- for my actions and inactions? Have I not done things I am deeply ashamed of, would not do again if I could go back in time, and would prefer no one to know about? What makes me so reluctant to call those actions "sins"? Is the word really out of date? Or is the problem that it has too sharp an edge?

The Hebrew verb *chata'*, "to sin," like the Greek word *hamartia*, literally means straying off the path, getting lost, missing the mark. Sin -- going off course -- can be intentional or unintentional. "You shoot an arrow, but it misses the target" a rabbi friend once explained to me. "Maybe it hits someone's backside, someone you didn't even know was there. You didn't mean it, but it's a sin. Or maybe you knew he was there -- he was what you were aiming at. Then it's not a matter of poor aim but of hitting his backside intentionally. Now that's a sin!"

The Jewish approach to sin tends to be concrete. The author of the Book of Proverbs lists seven things which 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 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.

"We're capable of doing some rotten things," the Minnesota storyteller Garrison Keillor notes, "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 Schmemmann wrote, "not one admitted to having committed any sin whatsoever!"

For the person who has committed a serious sin, there are two vivid signs -- the hope that what I 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. (Rod Steiger in the film *The Pawnbroker*, in a desperate action to break free of numbness, slammed a nail-like spindle through his hand so he could finally feel something, even if it meant 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 (Rom 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.

Guilt is not quite the same thing.

Guilt 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. He isn't likely to die a martyr for the faith. Dr. More is both a physician and a patient at a Louisiana mental hospital. From time to time he meets with his colleague Max, a psychologist eager to cure More of guilt.

Max tells More,

"We found out what the hangup was and we are getting ready to condition you out of it."

"What hangup?"

"Your guilt feelings."

"I never did see that."

Max explains that More's guilt feelings have to do with adulterous sex.

"Are you speaking of my fornication with Lola...?" asks More.

"Fornication," repeats Max. "You see?"

"See what?"

"That you are saying that lovemaking is not a natural activity, like eating and drinking."

"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."

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, then it is guilt that has no divine reference point. It is simply me contemplating me with the eye of an irritated theater critic. 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 them selves alone but an open communion of love in which we are not only invited but intended to participate.

A blessed guilt is the pain we feel when we realize we have cut ourselves off from that divine communion that radiates all creation. It is impossible not to stand on what Thomas Merton called "the hidden ground of love" but easy not to be aware of the hidden ground of love or even to resent it.

Like Dr. Thomas More, we may find ourselves hardly able to experience the guilt we know intellectually that we ought to feel not only for what we did, or failed to do, but for having fallen out of communion with God.

"Guilt," comments my Romanian friend Ioana Novac, "is a sense of fearful responsibility after realizing we have taken the wrong step and behold its painful consequences. In my experience, unfortunately not many people can tolerate this insight. My hunch is that many people these days experience less and less love, less and less strengthening support from their families and communities. As life gets more harried and we become more afflicted, the burden of guilt increases while our courage to embrace repentance -- to look ourselves straight in the mirror and face the destructive consequences of our blindness and wrong choices -- decreases."

It's a 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 won't generate ripples. 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.

This is a topic Garrison Keillor addressed in one of his Lake Wobegon stories. A friend -- Keillor calls him Jim Nordberg -- writes a letter in which he recounts how close he came to committing adultery. Nordberg 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 Nordberg 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 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 table cloth. 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."

By the end of the letter it's clear that Nordberg 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.

One of the most widely used prayers,

the Jesus Prayer

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. 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 any more as I have been living, because in living that way I wall myself apart 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. In the words of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, "There can be no absolution where there is no repentance."

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

The Son Who Returns

The parable of the Prodigal Son forms the main part of the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel. Few New Testament stories include so much detail. It's a parable not only about a particular father and son who lived two thousand years ago but about anyone urgently in need of forgiveness and love -- a story about confession, pardon, and the healing of shattered relationships.

There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of property that falls to me."

Christ describes a young man so impatient to come into his inheritance and be independent that in effect he says to his father, "As far as I'm concerned, you're already dead. Give me now what would have come to me after your funeral. I want nothing more to do with you or with this house." We can only

guess what prefaces the story. Perhaps the younger son saw his father as too strict or his home life too confining, too dull. Perhaps he felt less loved than his older brother who seemed always to be a model of good behavior.

Most of us need only to look in the mirror to catch a glimpse of younger brother: someone in a hurry to have what he wants and ready to neglect, even despise, those whom God intends him to love -- parents, brothers and sisters, friends, neighbors, strangers, enemies. The young man of Christ's story is me.

And he divided his living between them.

With God-like generosity, the father agrees to do what his son asks, though he knows his son well enough to realize that all that the boy receives might as well be burned in the kitchen stove. The boy takes his inheritance and leaves, intending never to return. With money in his pocket, he is at last free of parents, free of his brother, free of domestic morals and good behavior, free of boredom, free to do as he pleases. He is unable to imagine how short-lived his adventure will be, how quickly the money will be spent, or to conceive that not a single person who enjoys the company of a reckless spender will want to see him once he is penniless, or in what loneliness and misery he will eventually find himself.

Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. He would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything.

This was a story first told to Jews -- thus there was a special poignancy in the detail about the boy being so cut off from his own people that he lived with pigs and ate their food. Jews regard swine as too filthy to raise or eat.

But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father.

Near starvation, he finally realizes what a hell he has made for himself. Every door is locked against him. People he had thought of as friends sneer at him. He has made himself filthy in body and soul. He knows he has

renounced the claim to be anyone's son, yet in his desperation and misery dares hope his father might at least allow him to return home as a servant. Full of dismay for what he said to his father and what he did with his inheritance, he walks home in his rags, ready to confess his sins, to beg for work, and to ask for a corner to sleep in.

But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

The son cannot imagine the love his father has for him or the fact that, despite all the trouble he caused, he has been desperately missed. Far from being glad to be rid of the boy, the father has gazed day after day in prayer toward the horizon in hope of his son's return. Had he not been watching he would not have noticed his child in the distance and realized who it was. Instead of simply standing and waiting for him to reach the door, he ran to meet him, embracing his child, pouring out words of joy and welcome rather than reproof or condemnation.

And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

This is the son's confession compacted into a single sentence. It is the essence of any confession.

The moment of confession and reunion is what Rembrandt focused on in an etching he made in 1636. The father enfolds his son in much the way an Orthodox priest bends over a person who has completed his confession. The father's right arm gently rests on his son's back while his left hand supports his son's clasped hands. The arrangement of the father's feet suggests the act of having run toward his child. His face radiates compassion, forgiveness, and anguish for all his son has suffered. While the ravaged face of the kneeling son is marked with the hard times he has known, most of all we see his grief, remorse, and appeal for forgiveness. His hands are clasped in a gesture of urgent prayer. He cannot comprehend his father's joy.

"...But the father said to his servants, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." And they began to make merry...."

In a stairway to the right two servants are bringing shoes and fresh clothing, though one of them turns his face aside, perhaps in aversion to the boy's smell. A maid, having pushed open a shuttered window, gazes with amazement at the miracle of reconciliation. Beneath her, Rembrandt has

arranged father and son in the form of a triangle, a traditional symbol of the Holy Trinity. The restoration of mutual love between parent and child is an image of the restoration of communion for each repentant person with God. This moment of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation is also the theme of a huge painting by Rembrandt that now hangs in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg and is reproduced on this book's cover.

The story has another layer not hinted at in the etching: the resentment of an older brother.

Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound." But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, "Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!" And he said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."

Hatred can burn hottest within a family. Siblings often bitterly resent each other. The first murder -- the first war -- involved the sons of Adam and Eve: Cain and Abel. The older brother in Christ's parable of the Prodigal Son, while no killer, represents those who take pride in their obedience and good behavior but who fall prey to self-righteousness. The "good boy" arrives home from a day of labor to discover a celebration under way, his unmissed brother at its center, and refuses to take part. Why such joy and honor for someone whom he thought he had seen the last of and whom he regards as worse than a thief? His father has to reassure his older son that his love for him is as great as for his younger son. "Your brother has risen from the grave," he explains. "Now you must rise with him." It was as hard for the older brother to welcome the younger as it was for the younger to come home in rags and failure.

At a recent conference on confession in Oxford, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, a former physician who now heads the Russian Orthodox Church in Britain, spoke about the Prodigal Son.

"This parable is the same experience we have in confession," he said. "God longs for our return. He cries over our betrayals of him

and of ourselves. At the moment we reappear, he rushes to greet us. We discover that we are longed for, we are awaited, we are loved even in our sinfulness, loved with a love that never diminishes, something other than the quiet and peaceful love the father has for the son who has never done wrong. We are met by a father who opens his arms, who is not a judge but a savior."

He noted too how much each of us resembles the son who took his inheritance and squandered it. "We are no different. All the time we take from God all that he would give, all that we want, and use it according to our own tastes. God gives us life. How do we use it? Occasionally we may think: 'Wasn't it kind of him to give me so many things that I want. It was God's -- now it is mine.' Of course we don't dare to actually say it. We say it not directly but indirectly. It is a sin against God, a turning away that is more horrible than denying him. We cross the river from God's realm to Satan's, where life is more interesting. We leave God to cry over our betrayal. This is sin: turning our back on God for more interesting things. We turn our back on God -- God who loved us into existence at risk to himself. We say to God, 'You are not interesting enough.' Still, we turn to him occasionally, for he is the provider. We demand more of our inheritance. We sin against God by discarding and despising his gifts. We sin against God in the way we treat people. Yet everyone is loved, loved to the measure of Christ's death on the cross. He descends into hell for us, to find us even there."

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