

## **Practicing Lent: True Confessions**

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*“The things we cannot accept in ourselves we project upon others. If I do not admit my shadow side, I will unconsciously find another who will carry my shadow for me. Once this projection is made, then I need not be upset with myself. My problems are now outside and I can fight them “out there” rather than within the real arena, myself.”*

John Welch, *Spiritual Pilgrims*

Confession is good for the soul—and everyone around us. Without the ability to face ourselves honestly and confess not only our sin and bad behaviors but also the shadow that drives them, we become dangerous to one another in the human community. We project our own darkness onto others rather than dealing with the darkness within ourselves and the weight of that is too much for any of us to bear. Lent is the season for coming out of the shadows and coming clean.

Since projection is an unconscious process, we literally “do not know what we do” unless we have some practice that creates space for God to search us and show us what we could not otherwise see. No wonder Jesus’ message to us during Lent is *repent or perish*. Or even better—*keep repenting or keep perishing*. (Luke 13:3-5)

Confession is the discipline associated with repentance because it gives us something concrete to *do* with what we are seeing. It is the discipline that results in our ultimate freedom. But if confession is so good for the soul why is it so hard for us to do and do well?

### **Running from the Truth**

We live in a culture that promotes a profound sense of denial about the presence of sin in our lives and the ways in which our negative patterns wound the people around us. In our

litigious milieu, even when something *is* our fault, we are encouraged not to admit it unless we can derive some benefit from it (like a reduced penalty, repairing our public image, etc.) We are, in fact, encouraged to hide the truth until we can no longer get away with it. If and when we cannot avoid the truth any longer, we are prone to twist facts or misuse language in such a way that the spotlight of blame can be focused somewhere else. We use all sorts of means, ranging from flat-out denial to subtle misuse of language, to avoid having to admit we are wrong.

I remember dealing with a church elder who had spoken of a staff member in ways that were mean-spirited and slanderous. When confronted with clear evidence that she had misspoken and behaved badly, the best she could do was to acknowledge that “my communication was less than artful.” Her ability to couch her sin in a euphemistic phrase that obscured the seriousness of what she had done was stunning. In one smooth move, she avoided any real self-knowledge, she side-stepped the discipline of repentance and missed the joy and cleansing that comes from true confession and its resultant gift—forgiveness.

Many of us lack positive role models or practical guidance for understanding how confession works. In many families no one takes responsibility for their actions; when something goes wrong, the blame usually gets passed from one person to another until it lands (usually) with the most defenseless person in the system. Many young people have never seen a parent or any adult actually admit to sin or bad behavior much less hear them offer an apology without making excuses or blaming someone else. Usually this inability to repent and confess (in other words, take ownership for one’s behavior) is rooted in an unconscious avoidance of shame that is rooted in childhood experiences of

being shamed. In such cases the avoidance of personal responsibility is understandable but the result is that the pattern gets passed down from one generation to the next.

### **Coming Clean**

Confession is the outward action that results from the inner dynamic of repentance—one of the main disciplines of Lent. It begins with self examination and involves three moves which are subtle and yet distinct—seeing, naming, and then confessing. Sometimes all three moves take place in a moment, but most often it is a bit of a process.

The first element in the process of coming clean is simply *seeing* something that went wrong in a behavior or an action. It might be a vague sense of something that wasn't quite right (for instance, a subtle resistance to doing something loving for another person or a subtle shading of the truth for personal advantage) or it could be something that was more clear-cut (such as an angry outburst or a blatant lie.) We start to have some level of awareness of what happened and we might begin to get a glimpse of how our action or lack of action has fallen short of Christ-likeness and/or how it has wounded others.

The next move is *naming*—the willingness to name the sin or negative behavior clearly for what it is and to name *what was going on inside* that caused that behavior. This is not for the purpose of making excuses; rather it is to seek some understanding of the inner dynamics that caused the behavior so that we can deal with the temptation at it's root cause next time we are faced with it. Without this level of understanding, we might have good intentions for doing it differently next time but chances are we will be doomed

to repeat past mistakes because they are driven by hidden motives and unconscious drives that we have no control over precisely *because* they are unconscious.

In this element of the process, *we need God to guide us* because while we might see the behavior clearly, the inner wounds, character deficiencies, and sin patterns that drive such behaviors are often unknown to us and we need God to reveal them. That's why David prays, "*Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! See if there be any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.*" (Ps. 139:23, 24) This is the "searching and fearless moral inventory" that is fourth step in the Twelve Step program and David knows that he can't do it by himself.

### **True Confessions**

Naming or awakening to our sin initiates a stage in the spiritual life classically understood as purgation in which God gradually strips us of more and more layers of our own sinfulness and the denial that shrouds our self-awareness. As painful as it is to have these layers of the false self stripped away, it is really evidence of God's grace. It is evidence that God is at work leading us out of our bondage to sin and broken relationships into the freedom for love that is ours in Christ. At every level of the purgation process we are led to the final and most transforming aspect of the self-examination process: *confession*.

True confession requires us to name our sin out loud to ourselves, to God and to the person (s) we have hurt and to take steps to renounce it for Christ's sake. A true confession will involve the willingness to making restitution if that is needed. Confession, when practiced fully, is personal (between me and God), it is interpersonal (with the person I have hurt or offended), and it is corporate (in the context of worship in

community.) It is the interplay between these three that keeps confession healthy and productive. It is all too easy to confess our sins privately or to make a general confession as part of a church service; it is much harder to confess our selfishness to a spouse after a heated argument, our jealousy to a friend or co-worker after we have withdrawn our love and support, our impatience to our children after we have been on a rant, or our ego-driven pushing to our colleagues after we have behaved badly in a meeting.

### **Lenten Leadings**

Wouldn't it be something if we as leaders actually *led* others in practicing Lent by inviting God to help *us* make "a searching and fearless moral inventory" of ourselves? What if we invited God to help us see, name, and confess the ways in which we have wounded our lives and the lives of others—not only in our current situations but also in our history of friendships and working relationships. What if we invited God to show us the darkness we have projected onto others as a way of avoiding personal responsibility for our actions? And what if *we* took the courageous step to write notes, make phone calls, and have face to face meetings in which we confessed our sins to one another and asked forgiveness for sins past and present?

Confession leads to our ultimate freedom from sin, guilt, and the heavy burden of unresolved pain in our relationships. I cannot imagine a more powerful good in this world than Christian leaders who are willing to lead the way in confessing their sins to those they have wounded or offended, thus allowing the grace of God to flow more freely among us. The sacrifices God wants are not mere outward Lenten rituals, but rather broken and contrite hearts lived openly in his presence and in the presence of the real people he has given us to love in the human community.

## A PRAYER OF CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS

*Leader:* Before God, with the people of God,  
I confess to my brokenness:  
to the ways I wound my life,  
the lives of others,  
and the life of the world.

ALL: MAY GOD FORGIVE YOU,  
CHRIST RENEW YOU,  
AND THE SPIRIT ENABLE YOU TO GROW IN LOVE.

*Leader:* Amen.

*Iona Worship Book, 2001*

For a listing of Lenten Lectionary Readings, go to [www.thetransformingcenter.org/pdf/lectlent10.pdf](http://www.thetransformingcenter.org/pdf/lectlent10.pdf)

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