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Confession, Good for the Soul (Frederica Mathewes-Green)

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English

Does being a Christian mean always having to say you're sorry? When outsiders look at the Roman Catholic rite of confession (now more often termed «reconciliation»), they suspect it is driven by feelings of masochistic self-hatred, and sustained by claims of sacerdotal magic. Why should we have to spend this life groveling over sins, if Jesus already paid for them on the Cross? Why should we speak sins out loud to another person, when it could remain between us and the bedpost? And why should we believe that a priest stands between us and God, forgiving or retaining

our debts as he chooses?

Two new books from Roman Catholic authors attempt to make the case for regular sacramental confession. Scott Hahn, one of the best-known contemporary evangelical converts to Catholicism, builds «**Lord Have Mercy: The Healing Power of Confession**» (Doubleday) on a foundation of Scripture and Tradition. It's a work of firm and orderly persuasion, calling Catholics back to a sacrament that has become astonishingly neglected. In my own Catholic girlhood, once every couple of weeks was the norm; now, Hahn tells us, parishes of several thousand worshippers offer only a half-hour of posted times a week. Even priests themselves don't go to confession: «almost half of our priests avail *themselves* of the sacrament only 'once or twice a year,' 'rarely,' or 'never.'»

Ann M. S. LeBlanc's book, on the other hand, is really not much more than a booklet, at a mere 60 pages. It is saddled with an unwieldy title: «**Or Anytime by Appointment: How to Go to Confession When You Don't Know How**» (St. Anthony Messenger Press). The title is the only unwieldy thing about it, however, because the prose is lively and inviting, often funny, and on occasion quite beautiful.

LeBlanc has in mind a select audience: Catholics who want something more personal than what is expected during that posted half-hour, and who make an appointment with a priest for a private confession. She is addressing Catholics who haven't done this before and «don't know how,» and maybe aren't sure they want to.

She once put herself in that category. She recounts the following conversation with her priest, Father John:

«I'm not going to do it.»
«You don't have to, A. M.»
«No way I'm going to do it.»
«You don't have to, A. M.»
«No *!%*!& way I'm going to do it.»
«No one can make you, A. M.»
«It's not going to happen, so you can forget it!» «Will you *listen* to yourself?»

A.M. does it, of course, and through the rest of the book speaks frankly about what to expect. She doesn't lecture or shove, and her casual tone makes the content go down easy. LeBlanc knows that many of her readers had childhood experience with sacramental confession that inclines them to run the other way. «Everyone has

some version of ‘The Priest Who Fell Asleep,’ ‘The Priest Who Talked Real Loud,’ ‘How to Get the Priest Who Gave Easy Penances’?Popular among boys is the ‘The Time the Priest Got Really Mad at Me.’»

As these children entered teen years, they tried to discover «How to Say ‘Masturbation’ without Really Saying It,» and «[n]ew stories included ‘The Priest Who Asked a Lot of Questions’ and ‘The Priest Who Asked a *Real* Lot of Questions.’»

If this book were merely a collection of light-hearted passages it would still useful, but LeBlanc does better than that. Immediately on the heels of this passage comes, «[But] some [stories] were genuinely awful memories of hurt and bewilderment. These were never recounted in detail and didn’t lend themselves to funny titles. These were the stories of being shamed and berated in the confessional?[T]hese allusions came with the spoken or unspoken message, ‘That will never happen to me again.’»

It is this frankness about the pains encompassed by sin and sacrament that makes LeBlanc such an excellent guide. Sin is not a list of broken rules but «a heart condition,» she says; when Jesus calls us to abandon ourselves wholly to his service, counting up the times you yelled at your kids «starts to seem like it might miss the point.» In conversation with a trusted priest you can explore patterns of selfishness, and gain insight into ways to resist them. This is nothing like therapy, she insists: «Nowhere in therapy do you step into the arms of God.»

It is a sacrament because ultimately God is at work, not you. LeBlanc lives in Maine, and likens it to the process of ice breaking up in spring. After false starts and reverses, «[o]ne day we suddenly find the river rushing heedlessly for the ocean, with huge gouts of slush and big chunks of ice, dirty and packed with gravel underneath, full of sticks, old fishing gear, and the ragged pelts and bones of small animals. We didn’t cause it, we didn’t even know when it started, we just watched and waited, knowing that it absolutely was going to happen. We turn, and find the water coursing through the river, and through our hearts, wild, unimpeded, and full of air.»

Well, when you put it that way, it sounds pretty good. Her description of this sacrament resonated with my own experience as an Orthodox Christian; I go regularly to talk with my friend Fr. George, a heroic and joyous man who decades ago endured torture in Romanian communist prisons. Like LeBlanc, I am grateful to have such a wise and good friend, and welcome his advice, and especially his prayers. The risky act of speaking sins aloud, and being greeted with open

forgiveness, has an impact you can't get in dialogue with a bedpost. That's the healing power of confession.

Scott Hahn's book is subtitled «The Healing Power of Confession,» but it focuses less on the experience of healing than on establishing the Church's authority in sacramental confession. When Jesus breathed on the apostles, «those first clergymen,» they were explicitly given his power to bind and loose sins, Hahn says. «He was establishing them as priests, to administer a sacrament, but also as judges, to pronounce judgment upon the actions of believers.» The rabbis of Israel had similar authority to exclude individuals from the life and worship of the community, but Jesus now expands it. «No longer would the authorities pass a sentence that was merely earthly. Since the Church shared the power of God incarnate, her power would extend as far as the power of God.»

A situation with such anxiety-provoking potential requires clear rules. «Sin is any action-any thought, word, deed, or omission-that offends God, violates His law, or dishonors the order of creation.» Further, sins may be categorized as venial or mortal. Venial sins damage us spiritually, but mortal sins kill us. Mortal sins meet «three conditions: grave matter, full knowledge, and deliberate consent.» It is not necessary to confess venial sins, but mortal sins must be confessed or the person will be eternally lost.

How do you know if you confessed correctly? There are three conditions. First, you must be sorry for your sins, a state called «contrition.» If sorrow is mixed with lesser emotions, such as fear or shame, it is called «attrition.» «It will suffice for a valid confession, though we should always strive for a more perfect penance.»

Secondly, you must confess them aloud to a priest. «[C]learly state the types of mortal sin we've committed and the number of times we've committed them. If we hold back, we have not made a valid confession.» Deliberately withholding a mortal sin is a mortal sin.

Already we seem to be in a different universe than LeBlanc's, where the interior work of sacramental healing is displaced by a description of external actions, qualifications, and concerns about technical validity. But it is the third requirement that will trouble Protestants most: you must «complete the work of penance or restitution.»

Hahn finds a biblical foreshadowing of this in Old Testament sacrifices: the sinner was required to personally offer God something costly and difficult in satisfaction for his sins. While our offenses against God are so great that we could never

actually pay for them-Hahn says it’s like the difference between punching your neighbor and punching the president—we are obligated to offer whatever sacrifice we can.

This is not the only way Hahn presents confession; he also speaks of it as healing and reconciliation, and devotes a chapter to the parable of the Prodigal Son. Yet he does not address the difference between Jesus’ parable and the Catholic approach. The forgiving father didn’t demand restitution from the erring son; he just welcomed him home. The father didn’t stand on his status as a wealthy landowner; he didn’t behave as if the son had punched the president rather than a mere neighbor. He just embraced him.

Hahn argues that God cannot do this. Our offense is so gross, and God’s dignity so immense, that the debt must be paid and not merely forgiven. To the objection that «Jesus paid it all» Hahn responds that Christ was our «legal representative» in the Atonement, but could not be our «penal substitute.» «Economically, the substitutionary theory works; but in criminal law, it does not. For an innocent man to be punished in our place would itself be a kind of injustice.»

Hahn knits together four aspects of the atonement-economic, military, liturgical, and legal-under one heading, that of covenant. Only from the perspective of covenant, he says, can we understand the full mystery of reconciliation.

This choice of covenant analogy distills for me the point where Hahn’s presentation fails. It is so relentlessly *external*. A covenant is what enables everyone to get along peaceably, without meddling or disturbance. It is concerned only with outward acts, and calls for only external self-control. In this view sins are separate and discrete actions, caused by fleshly hungers, and the cure is to set the mind in firmer control of the body.

The Gospel reality is more intimate and challenging than mere orderly covenant, however. If «the kingdom of God is within you,» if we are in Christ and he in us, we are more than good neighbors. If sins come «out of the treasure of the heart,» then merely correcting external actions isn’t enough. We can’t trust the mind to rule the body; fallen human reason can drive sin as readily as the body does. Thoughts are frequently the door to actions; there’s a reason «rational» and «rationalize» have the same root.

As a Catholic girl I had a Sunday School book that showed the soul before and after confession. Before confession it looked like a milk bottle blotchy with mold; after confession it was sparkling clean. If confession is just a matter of getting the debt

zeroed out, getting square with the covenant community, that makes sense. But what if it is a «heart condition» as LeBlanc says? Then it will be a lifelong process of healing, in which continual gratitude for forgiveness spurs us to be ever more honest about the ways in which we need it. We recognize our sins long after God does, and long after the Cross made possible their forgiveness. Yet we don't get free of their tyranny until we name and reject them, often fumbling and falling but continuing to try.

This is a subtle distinction, between taking on self-disciplines to grow in strength to resist future sins, and performing acts of self-denial in order to contribute payment toward past ones. It is the difference between LeBlanc's and Hahn's books, and I believe that Hahn more accurately reflects classic Catholic theology. Again, he does not omit consideration of sin as sickness, but it is overshadowed by the view of sin as infraction, and the two views are not well integrated.

In reading this book I was regularly surprised by unexpected depths. Hahn is wiser than he seems because he strives to write at a simple and popular level. For example, the book opens with the story of how he, as a young teen in Pittsburgh, stole records from a store. He was caught and made up a story about being coerced by older boys to steal and then drop the records by a stump in the woods. Scott got away with it, but his success at deceiving his dad made him miserable.

In commenting on this, Hahn makes the valuable point that when we tell ourselves self-excusing stories, we cut ourselves dangerously loose from reality. «We begin to lose the narrative thread of our lives. Things no longer make sense to us. Relationships grow cold. We lose our sense of purpose and sense of ourselves.» We all do this all the time, and it takes great effort to resist it and practice honesty, but we must realize that we are in God's all-seeing presence all the time anyway. We must grow to tolerate that light, because it is the only light there is; all else is confusion and darkness.

A thought-provoking passage, but it is marred by being divided up every few pages with headings that employ chummy, clumsy puns: «Pittsburgh Stealer,» «Scott-Free,» «Forest Clump,» «Setting the Records Straight.» These groaners detract from the seriousness of his message. He is a better writer than this.

Hahn’s book is well-organized and documented, and will serve as an excellent guide to anyone seeking to understand the classic Roman Catholic theology of sacramental confession. LeBlanc’s book is more of a riff, a flowing exploration of the experience of that sacrament. It’s the one I would choose if I wanted someone to understand, not just the rationale for confession, but its healing power.

By Frederica Mathewes-Green

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