

While working as a chaplain at Wooster School in Danbury, a colleague lamented one day, “Why do we need to always be talking about sin? Why can’t we focus on more positive things? Sin is so depressing!” No truer words were spoken. Indeed, sin can certainly be a downer. The passion behind her question, however, reflected the feeling of many that the Church makes us focus on our faults, missteps, misdeeds, misconduct, transgressions, or, as the tradition would call them, sins of omission and commission. Indeed, the introduction to the confession that the Lutheran Church used years ago did not paint a very upbeat picture of our humanity. It stated: We are by nature sinful and unclean. So much for I’m okay, you’re okay.

While I think that the question of the Wooster faculty person possesses an element of truth (the Church has undoubtedly been guilty of fixating on the guilt of the faithful) there is a reason that the acknowledgement of sin--confession--exists. In short, confession exists so that we might come clean, as it were. We all fall short of what the tradition calls the glory of God. Though, the glory of God comes in all shapes and sizes. I would say that we fall short of our own ideals for ourselves, we fall short of what others need or expect, we fall short of what the world needs from us. We fall short. Indeed, the Greek word for sin--*hamartia*--means to miss the mark or fall short. We don’t quite hit the intended target for our thoughts, words, and deeds. Ultimately, this reality does not come with a moral judgment (we are *good* or *bad*). It simply is. And we are being honest about the world and ourselves when we confess.

However, the unfortunate aspect of this awareness is that it has been used as a blunt instrument to make people feel guilty or bad about themselves. The legacy of Medieval Church thinking, Reformation era anthropology, and a strong dose of American Puritanism has only confirmed and perpetuated the guilt and shame that is the experience of too many. And guilt and shame are terrible motivators. Often, they simply perpetuate more of the same. Meanwhile, the very heart of confession contains the principle of freedom. In essence, when we come clean, we are cleansed. We have a new slate. The burdens are lifted and removed. Guilt and shame need not be the driving forces in life. Whether we believe it or not, acknowledge it or not, live into it or not, we are liberated every time we confess and absolution is pronounced.

Of course, this is not a recipe for libertinism or wantonness. That is, we throw all rules and principles out the door because we are forgiven every time we confess. Such thinking misses the whole point. It’s not that we are good so that we can attain God’s grace. Rather, God’s grace allows us to acknowledge when we have missed the mark, trusting that such honesty and God’s mercy allow us to return--which is the meaning of repentance or *metanoia*--to a right relationship with the divine and within ourselves. (The language of those who struggle with addiction or a journey away from the path of life often betrays this. They talk about being “lost”.) Being good doesn’t make us worthy. Being loved wholly, fully, and unconditionally frees us to live and to be good.

Now, all of this is well and good and, up to this point, mostly theoretical (though, I trust that you inserted moments that you have wrestled with while reading this). A major reason that we talk about sin and do confess became horrifically clear this past week.

The heinous acts of priests, bishops, and the larger Church structure toward over a thousand children in Pennsylvania were condemned in a recent grand jury report. The scale of the atrocities and the complicity of so many stuns anyone with a semblance of a conscience. My colleague would say that *those* are the actions that need to be confessed and brought to light. *There* sin resides. *That* is evil. Our misdeeds pale by comparison. And the scale and cover up and disregard for innocent children shatters the mind. It is easy to condemn and to cast the perpetrators and abettors as wholly other and wholly depraved.

Yet, is part of the reason for such abhorrent action the lack of confession and the acknowledgement of sin? I do not mean to insinuate that the priests preying on children didn't know the criminality of their acts. And I am not naive enough to think that if a little more confession had taken place, all would be well (indeed, the perpetrators participated in that sacrament weekly). And the delayed justice of our legal system must most certainly come to bear. The pope, for his part, noted that the Church failed. The whole scenario is an abomination of individual, institutional, and systemic culpability. With power being one of the chief impediments. The abuse of power by priests. The yielding to power by parishioners. The exercise of power by bishops. And on and on, allowing a sinister web of abuse to exist and grow.

Thus, I wonder about confession that creates an environment where such power--or the abuse of it--is constantly challenged, for, while we trust individuals to faithfully perform their roles within the Church, we do not genuflect to position or title or honorific. We understand that *ALL* do sin and, thus, need to repent. We also are aware of the potential for abuse, and we hold people accountable. No one ascends a pedestal. In confessing our sin, we continue to practice the virtue of honesty. In confessing our sin, we are aware of its presence in the world about us. In confessing our sin, we do not berate ourselves but participate in a practice that can be the first line of defense to the lies and corruption that so easily find expression in the world. You will know the truth and the truth will set you free is the phrase Jesus used. Oftentimes, such awareness, honesty, and acknowledgement is what moves us to act, hopefully sets us free, and spurs us to provide the same for all whom we meet.