

The Benefit of Private Confession and Absolution:

Some years ago I called my pastor to make an appointment for individual confession and absolution. Like many other Lutherans, I'd never done that before. You must understand that I hadn't robbed a bank or been unfaithful to my spouse. In fact, I hadn't sinned any more (or less) that week than usual. I simply desired to hear God's forgiveness, life and salvation proclaimed personally and individually. I learned that individual confession is a valuable pathway, given to us by God, for our spiritual renewal. You might ask, "Why would you want to seek individual confession when the general confession is already a part of the regular church service?"

Jesus instituted individual confession, instructing his church to apply the Gospel individually. Jesus told his disciples, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (John 20:22-23). God sent His disciples, in His name, to speak His forgiveness to penitent sinners. Many Lutherans have treasured the gift of individual confession. In fact, Martin Luther said that participating in the general confession exclusively was really only for the "*strongest* Christians"! Lutherans believe that individual confession is a comforting supplement to the general confession.

As I prepared to meet with my pastor, I'll admit that I thought much more deeply about the role of sin in my life than I ordinarily do. I began to review carefully the choices I'd made which prevented me from doing God's will, and I recalled the ways in which I had broken God's Law. I decided that there were really a number of sins troubling my conscience which I wanted to confess. I was confident that when those explicit sins were forgiven in the name of Jesus they would be gone forever.

Perhaps the most difficult part of individual confession was my reluctance to confess my faults in front of my pastor. Ordinarily most of us will do anything we can to have others think well of us. I wondered "what will the pastor think of me if he knows my specific sins and failings?" It was important for me to know that the pastor confesses *his* sins to *another* pastor. Therefore I was confident he would understand *exactly* how I felt and would be there to support and help me, not to judge me.

After all, who better than the pastor knows that we all battle against Satan, the world and our own sinful nature? It was important for me to learn, though, that if it is more difficult for me to name my sins before my pastor than it is to name my sins before Almighty God, I may not have been taking the magnitude of my sin nor the reality of God's wrath seriously enough.

I was relieved to know that there wasn't a "right" way to confess specific sins. I realized that I didn't have to mention every sin I had ever committed, and I also knew that I didn't have to provide all of the details surrounding my sin (God knows all of the facts, but He is pleased and eager to hear me confess the sin to Him).

In individual confession God would have us do away with our pretense and our sinful pride so that we may speak the truth about our sin. In confession we can't offer rationales for our sin nor can we blame other people. My pastor once said in class, "in confession we're not interested in the extenuating circumstances, we're interested in the sin". When we confess, we give up all our defenses and we stand empty handed and without excuse before God, submitting to the promise of His grace. The only thing we can bring to God in confession is our sin and our contrite spirit.

As the rite began, my pastor knelt with me and I read an excerpt from Psalm 51. As I confessed the several things which troubled me, the pastor remained silent. He asked no questions and made no comments; I was speaking to God in the pastor's presence.

My pastor served as Christ's representative: The pastor heard my confession in the place of God; my pastor's voice spoke Christ's own Word of Absolution; and my pastor's hand raised to confer Christ's blessing. Luther described the pastor's role in individual confession like this: "It is Christ who sits there, Christ who hears, Christ who answers and not a man."

I'll admit that I felt shame; my pride made it difficult for me to speak about my disobedience to God. Yet I realized that Christ had not been ashamed to bear my sins publicly on His atoning cross. Therefore, I knew no sin was too shameful to confess and no sin was too trivial to be forgiven completely and eternally by Christ's perfect love.

God opens our lips to speak and then we must open our ears to hear what Christ would have us learn. After hearing my confession, the pastor spoke about the spiritual consequences of violating God's Law. He offered warning and counsel regarding the sins I had named. Hearing the Law prepared my heart to hear the Gospel message, shared in the form of Holy Absolution. The pastor stood and asked if I believed that his proclamation of forgiveness was actually God's forgiveness. I answered, "Yes. I Do."

Then I listened to Christ, speaking in the voice and person of my pastor as the Holy Absolution was proclaimed. I had the sacred privilege of receiving Christ's healing and personal acquittal from my sin. My sin had been buried forever in the death of Christ and I had been raised up once again to live out His life within me.

The pastor closed the rite with a benediction. I realized that I had just participated in a miracle of grace and felt genuine awe. I had a keen awareness of God's presence, His personal love for me as His child, and a feeling of reverent celebration leading to praise and thanksgiving, with the desire for greater service and obedience.

Many Lutherans have never participated in Individual Confession and Absolution. You may be uncertain about your desire or ability to do this, just as I was. I can only reassure you that I have had no regrets about choosing to do it, and I will participate in the rite again because it has been so rich in personal blessing.

I would encourage you to consider the power and possibilities this Rite offers you. The power in this Rite is Christ's healing and transforming power to rescue you, renew you and set you free. And *if the Son sets you free*, Jesus said, *you will be free indeed*.

- a Penitent