

Pastor's Pen: Beyond a Cultural Catholicism Part 4

Back in 1970 a movie called "Love Story" came out in theaters. I can't say that I have seen, will see it, or even have even an inkling of a desire to sit through more than 10 seconds of it. That said, I know one quote from the movie: "Love means never having to saying you're sorry." In the lines of cinema I am aware of, fewer are more inane than this one. As inane as it is, you would think it was our society's personal mantra.

The precepts of the Church are more than just about setting up hoops for membership; they are about defining what a relationship with God and His people looks like. The same things that build up our relationships with our human relationships also build up our relationship with God. The same things that hurt or destroy our human relationships also hurt or destroy our relationship with God.

Cultural Catholicism, at its heart, is a consumer faith. It has no more relationship with God than a person has with the manager of a store. It has a minimal relationship with the parish that a person might have with a store, even a favored store. The consumer goes to the store to get things, but does not add their time and effort to the mission of the store. Actual Catholicism stretches beyond such a lowbrow understanding and sees that what is happening is about relationships that mirror a family and not a business.

Why say this? Because when harm or division is introduced into the family, it needs to be dealt with so as to bring about reconciliation. Left unchecked, these initial divisions lead to estrangement, isolation from the family, or even an animosity within the family. Contrary to the woeful sentiment of Love Story, yes, love DOES mean saying you're sorry.

Dealing with Reality

In teaching that all Catholics must confess their sins to a priest once a year, the Church is acknowledging a simple fact: we human beings sin. We can be selfish and destructive in little ways. We can be selfish and destructive in big ways. The Church is not presuming that a person is in mortal sin, but that tending to our relationship with God is worth the effort of at least once a year being honest about how our choices may have damaged or destroyed that bond with God and consequently, His Body the Church. Ignoring the situation does not make it go away. Denying the situation is present does not make it go away.

Confession acknowledges that we have a relationship with God in a very powerful way. Not submitting myself to confession means that I am avoiding the two extremes that mar even our human relationships. On the one side is a presumption of forgiveness. On the other side is either the despair of feeling I cannot be forgiven or the arrogance of believing I do not need to be forgiven.

Think about that for a moment. Someone hurts you. They cannot be bothered to apologize directly. Yet they presume you have forgiven them. Maybe they are aware that they have hurt you but view you in such a way as they think you lack the capability to forgive them. Maybe they hurt you and

they just do not care. Will these things hurt or help your relationship? In human relationships, these fears might well be real. In our relationship, we approach a God who wants to forgive us and will forgive us if we turn back to Him. If we turn back to Him!

Why Can't I Just Say Sorry

Many just will say all I have to do is tell God that I am sorry in my heart and all is done. There is no scriptural basis for such a belief. All forgiveness of sins is mediated. In Catholicism, all forgiveness is mediated by Jesus Christ Himself. In that mediation a grace called sanctifying grace is given which unites us to Himself, and through Him, to the Father. After the Resurrection, He charges His apostles with carrying out this ministry (see John 20:22-23) of forgiveness of sins in His name and by His power. In confession, we concretely own up to what we have done and we concretely hear those words by which we are restored. There is no need to presume or guess. Since the Church desires that her children be united with Christ and through Christ, His Church, she teaches as a precept that at least once a year we go to confession.

Let's be honest, though. Over the years, I have played this same game of saying all I need to do is tell God I am sorry and we are good. The real reason people hide behind this? Hiding behind this doesn't force me to own up to my decisions. Saying something in my head and vocalizing this to another person are two wildly different things. Since mortal sin not only severs the relationship with God, it severs the relationship with His people as well, then both divisions must be dealt with to bring about restoration. It is like this: I have seen situations so grave against a parent that it harms the relationship between siblings as well. Do not all relationships need to be restored?

Confession affords the capability to own our choices, be forgiven for our choices, and be reunited to what was lost through our choices.

Not Shooting for the Minimum

In this precept, there is an understanding that I am willing to change even if I am not completely successful at this change. In saying once a year, it sets a minimum, not a maximum. As we witness with children in 2nd grade, we place a direct connection between confession and reception of Holy Communion. It is a grave and mortal sin to willingly receive Holy Communion in a state of mortal sin. The Church would just as soon not force you into doing this. Hence, it is highly recommended for priests to be generous with times for confessions.

At SS Peter and Paul, I have confessions Tuesday through Saturday one half hour before weekday Masses. I also have confession from 4:30 to 5:15 on Saturday afternoons. I also have them for 45 minutes before all Holy Day Masses. On first Fridays during the school year, I am available from 8:50 to 11:30. At St. Joseph, I have confessions on Wednesdays from 5:30 to 6:15 and 45 minutes before all Holy Day Masses. I also will stop what I am doing, short of going to give Last Rites, to fulfill a request for confession. As I have said on many occasions, I can't make you do anything, but I can take away your excuses!