

The Beauty of Penance

By Bishop Victor Galeone

My dear friends in Christ,

A number of years ago I was summoned to the rectory parlor to meet with a drop-in visitor. Since I was the pastor of an area rife with panhandlers, I braced myself for a potential handout. Instead, waiting in the parlor was a clean-cut young man, who appeared visibly nervous. Anxiously rubbing his hands, he proceeded to tell me the following story.

“Father, I’m so ashamed of myself, I don’t know how to begin. You see, I’m not Catholic, but I grew up in this neighborhood. When I was twelve years old, a Catholic buddy of mine talked me into breaking into school one Saturday morning. We climbed in through a window in the basement that he had left unlatched the day before when he was on lunch cleanup. From there we went from classroom to classroom, emptying into our pockets the coins from these little boxes on the teachers’ desks. I didn’t make too much of it at the time. All I remember is that we had a good time at a lot of Saturday matinees.

“Then about seven years ago, I came to know the Lord and surrendered my heart to Him. Would you believe it, what I did then as a kid has come back to haunt me. I had plumb forgotten about it until I became a Christian. So I got down on my knees and asked God to forgive me - time and time again! But I still kept feeling guilty. Then last week, while I was doing my Bible study on Matthew chapter 25, as I read that verse where Jesus says, ‘I was hungry but you gave me no food,’ I had a flashback to that Saturday morning. Once more I saw those little cardboard boxes with pictures of these little African children on them, and I could almost hear Jesus say to me, ‘Kurt, not only didn’t you give me any food, but even the food that I had coming to me you took for yourself.’

“Father, I’ve fasted for three days for the courage to come back and make amends for what I did then.” Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a folded check, which he handed me. “I don’t know how much money I took, but I would like you to use this amount for some poor family in your Church that needs help.”

After we prayed together, Kurt left to return to his wife and two small children. The reason that I shared his story with you is that it’s one of several experiences I’ve had in my life that underscore the beautiful gift that we Catholics have in the sacrament of Penance. The bottom line in every case was, I’ve asked God to forgive me dozens of times, but I still don’t feel right.” I do not wish us to confuse false guilt with real guilt. What I do want to stress is that Jesus, the divine psychologist, knows our human nature to the core. He anticipated Alcoholics Anonymous’ 12-Step Program by almost 2,000 years.

The crux of the entire 12 steps is Step Five: “Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” The AA manual places so much stress on this step that it states, “Most of us would declare that without a fearless admission of our defects to another human being we could not stay sober.” The manual asks some pertinent questions: “Why can’t ‘God as we understand Him’ tell us where we are astray? Why don’t we make our admissions to Him directly? Why do we need to bring anyone else into this?”

The manual goes on to give the answers: “Though we may at first be startled to realize that God knows all about us, we are apt to get used to that quite quickly. Somehow, being alone with God doesn’t seem as embarrassing as facing up to another person. Until we actually sit down and talk aloud about what we have so long hidden, our willingness to clean house is still largely theoretical. When we are honest with another person, it confirms that we have been honest with ourselves and with God.”

