

Just in time for Lent: rediscovering confession

Diane Scharper | Mar. 14, 2012

THE ART OF CONFESSION: RENEWING YOURSELF THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF HONESTY

By Paul Wilkes

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Touching on the many facets of confessing, Paul Wilkes seeks to redefine the subject.

Although he discusses the sacrament of reconciliation, this isn't a particularly Roman Catholic book or even an especially religious book. Blending history, memoir, psychology, philosophy, theology, sociology and self-help advice, Wilkes offers a kaleidoscopic presentation of confession with, as he says, a small "c."

Wilkes' work contains a little of everything: from admitting wrongdoing in ancient times; to establishing and reestablishing one's relationship with God in the Old Testament; to early Christian notions of repentance; to the Third Lateran Council (12th century), which regularized the sacrament of confession; to contemporary adulterous politicians who tell all, apologize profusely, but aren't really sorry; to therapeutic discussions of one's interior life; to "praying backward" as a way to understand oneself while connecting with the Divine.

A bestselling author and journalist (*The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*) Wilkes has a very personable and reader-friendly style. If the writing seems in danger of becoming too philosophical, which it often does, Wilkes rises to the occasion with a refreshing personal anecdote.

There's the discussion of his boyhood in Roman Catholic elementary school when every week Wilkes entered the confessional booth to measure his life by the Ten Commandments -- a topic sure to resonate with Catholics of a certain age. It was like a weekly bath, he says. Then there's Wilkes' remembrance of adolescence and the problem of confessing sins of the flesh while promising to sin no more and avoid the near occasions of sin -- with testosterone coursing through his body.

Wilkes also peppers his pages with lengthy quotes -- more like brief essays -- from four experts: a rabbi, a priest, a psychologist, and a nun who manages a self-help bookstore. Their essays are meant to exemplify and add insight to the topic at hand, and generally they succeed, although, coming as they do in the middle of the text, they are sometimes distracting.



But to be fair, Wilkes makes many valid points. His treatment of the

sacrament of reconciliation is especially interesting. One learns early on that after the Second Vatican Council underscored the primacy of the individual's conscience, confession went out of style. As Wilkes notes, in 1965, "nearly 40 percent of Catholics went to confession monthly; today the number is 2 percent." Yet confession was never one of the more popular seven sacraments.

Fr. Steven LaBaire (one of Wilkes' experts) says that confession didn't "make sense. You miss Mass once and you go to hell?" In addition, people didn't like to report a laundry list of offenses, especially when sins were more complicated than that. Absolution became (as LaBaire calls it) a "magical incantation." Even worse, Catholics were made to promise that they would sin no more. But how many people could make such promises in all honesty? Then with the emphasis on situational ethics and psychoanalysis, confession seemed an even less valid concept.

Unfortunately, when this sacrament went out the window, so did the notion of personal responsibility for wrongdoing -- which, as Wilkes sees it, is one of the problems with the present day.

When Wilkes looks at the concept of admitting wrongdoing in mankind's earliest days, the book gets on somewhat shaky ground as Wilkes supposes that confession had its beginnings with humans living in caves asking forgiveness of one another in order to avoid tearing the fragile (especially at that time) social fabric.

But the narrative picks up when Wilkes looks at the history of morality among the ancients. The Egyptians, for example, saw themselves as mortal human beings containing the seed of the divine. After death, Egyptians took the ultimate test measuring behavior against the 42 Declarations of Purity, which were similar to the Ten Commandments but much more comprehensive, including actions like not taking milk from the mouths of children and not causing pain.

Ultimately, as Wilkes describes it, confession is a shape-shifting state: It's an attitude. It's self-examination. It's being honest. It's stripping away pretenses. It's housecleaning the soul. It's "emptying to make room for something better." It's all of these taken together. But it's none of these exactly. All of which suggests that this brief book that aims to redefine confession never quite succeeds.

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