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Honors Program

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THE ART OF CONFESSION

by

Daniel T. Oliva

Honors Thesis
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A guilty conscience needs to confess. A work of art is a confession.

Albert Camus, Notebooks

During my years at the university, I have talked to all kinds of people, from all kinds of lifestyles, backgrounds, and beliefs; in doing so I have made a not-so-surprising discovery: confession is a dying art. Many college students today feel no need to confess; in the search for autonomy they attempt to loosen and throw off the chains of any external dependence. I find this fact quite discouraging, for I believe it is possible, in part, to attribute many of this generation's problems -- selfishness, pride, and greed, for example -- to the rarity of true confession. I argue that power exists in confession, a force strong enough to change lives. We can begin to understand just how confession can influence our own existence by looking at four distinct arenas: the Bible, the life of Saint Augustine, the institutional Church, and the "secular" realm of recovery groups. Before doing so, however, I will address the issue of the location of a key element of this power; thus

I begin with an illustration from the French philosopher Michel Foucault.

In his book "Discipline and Punish," Foucault writes of Bentham's Panopticon, a menacing correctional facility based on a unique form of punishment. The facility, through its structure, "induces in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power (Foucault 85)." Thus the prisoners, who never know if they are being observed or not, amazingly become self-regulating without the use of external force or coercion. The imagined, or fictional, authority causes the change in behavior. With this same power confession molds and alters much of society, whether it be in the church or on the street. A great amount of confession's power to change a person's life, as with the Panopticon, is not found in the objective arena; it lies, rather, in the subjective world, in the fictional realm. To confess is to tell a story, an autobiographical self-narrative; here, in this self-analysis, exists the reality and forcefulness of confession.

With the source of confession's power in mind, it is necessary to begin our investigation by looking at the Scriptures. In God's Word lay the foundations of confession, the first examples of self-revelation. The Bible has much to say on the subject of confession, in regards to its purpose and its benefits. The Hebrew word for confession, "yada'" means

"to know and respond to what one knows (Revell 241);" thus confession involves self-knowledge and introspection. The blessings of confession are recorded time and time again. One of the finest examples of the power of confession is seen in the praises and laments of King David. In Psalm 32 he cries:

When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day
long.
For day and night
your hand was heavy upon
me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to
you
and did not cover up my
iniquity.
I said, 'I will confess
my transgressions to the
LORD' --
and you forgave
the guilt of my sin (vv 3-5).

Groaning under the weight of his evil heart, David finally narrates his story to God, crying out the hidden things unknown to others. It is at this point that God begins to move in power, taking his burden of sin away. Through this psalm and his many other narratives, David becomes a man of God, transformed by the power of confession.

John writes, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)," and James adds, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you

may be healed (James 5:16)." The command is clear: to experience the power of confession, tell your story! John points to Jesus as the receiver, while James goes so far as to include other humans as receivers. Both men, however, insist that confession begins with individual initiation, faith enough to share one's personal account.

On the flip side, John speaks quite bluntly of the consequences of an unconfessed life: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we claim we have not sinned, we make [Christ] out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives (1 John 1:8,10)." Without the power of confession, without telling stories about themselves, people separate themselves from the life-changing love and acceptance of Jesus. Confession gives freedom by relieving the burden of sin in human lives. The Bible argues that through introspection and self-revelation, lives can be changed, healed, and saved.

Through Jesus and the Biblical doctrine of confession, billions of people's lives over the centuries have been greatly changed and influenced. One man in particular, Saint Augustine, played a key role in continuing the spread of Christianity in the world. His Confessions, the second subject of study in this thesis, stand as a testimony to the transforming power of Biblical confession. Written in the fourth century, it is one of the first autobiographical works of literature. Within

the pages of the Confessions, one finds example after example of the life-changing force of the narrative upon Augustine's moral state. From the start, it is quite obvious that a necessary key to his confessions is Augustine's openness and humility. He tells the story as though he were opening a window to his soul: "My heart lies before you, O my God. Look deep within. See these memories of mine, for you are my hope. You cleanse me when unclean humours such as these possess me, by drawing my eyes to yourself and saving my feel from the snare (IV 6)."

The anguish and agony of the art of confession is seen throughout the work as well. In Foucault's Panopticon, each inmate is imprisoned in an individual cell which is completely visible from the central guard tower. Like the prisoner who still feels the oppressive force of external pressure, Augustine cries, "My thoughts, as I meditated upon you, were like the efforts of a man who tries to wake but cannot and sinks back into the depths of slumber . . . the only answers I could give were the drowsy words of an idler -- 'Soon', 'Presently', 'Let me wait a little longer' (VIII 5)." And like the prisoner, trapped and susceptible to the eyes of the world, Augustine exemplifies society's universal aversion to such confessional vulnerability:

I was in torment, reproaching myself more bitterly than ever as I twisted and turned in my chain. I hoped that my chain might be broken once and for all, because it was only a small thing that held me now.

All the same it held me . . . My lower instincts, which had taken firm hold of me, were stronger than the higher, which were untried (VIII 11).

In the end, however, amidst the pain and emotional torment, Augustine's life is dramatically transformed. There comes a point in his existence when there is nowhere to turn, nothing to cling to or fall back on. In this time of utter despair and hopelessness Augustine writes, "I probed the hidden depths of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets from it, and when I mustered them all before the eyes of my heart, a great storm broke within me, bringing with it a great deluge of tears (VIII 12)." As he cries out to God, telling of his worst deeds and weaknesses, a change begins to occur, both emotionally and spiritually:

How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose and was now glad to reject! You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy . . . At last my mind was free from the gnawing anxieties of ambition and gain, from wallowing in filth and scratching the itching sore of lust (IX 1).

By confessing his sins to God, and later to the world, Augustine begins to live a disciplined, morally upright and virtuous life. Through his openness, vulnerability, and humility, Augustine was able to tell his narrative, share his "innermost thoughts," thus releasing the power of confession.

Modern-day Christianity, founded on the Bible and such works as Augustine's Confessions, has gone through countless changes and struggles since its first-century beginnings. Even

so, today the institution of the Church appears to be the final bastion of the confession-filled lifestyle. For both Catholics and Protestants confession is regarded as essential to the faith. In both churches, confession performs two major tasks: it is both a tool for reconciliation with God and with the Church community as a whole. There do exist, however, noticeable differences between the two branches of Christianity. These distinctions greatly influence the "Panopticonic" power of confession in the lives of the participating individuals.

In the Roman Catholic church, there is a great emphasis on community, on conforming to the social norms and standards. The Catechism states, "Those who approach [confession] are reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion (1422)." Sinners, or deviants, enter the confessionals, which strangely resemble the separate cells of the Panopticon: "The private and confined space, such as the prison, or madhouse, fits with the confessional box, and the Panopticon increases the sense of enclosure (Tambling 9)." Here they are brought into reconciliation with the community, regulated so as to fit in properly once more.

Because of this focus on community, the weight behind confession is more horizontal in nature, contradictory to the vertical authority symbolized by the Panopticon's central tower. Thus Catholic confession has a tendency to be regulated

externally by human effort rather than internally, falling short of the Panopticon ideal. Two structures in particular, within the Church, perpetuate this external control. The necessity of a priest is one doctrine which supports this idea of outside authority. "Confession to a priest is an essential part of the sacrament of Penance . . . each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year (Catechism 1456-7)." This control is strengthened by such things as seminars on "How to Make a Good Confession" (Connell 243) and special "authorized" rites and prayers made available to the public, such as the following: "Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Lord, turn to us in mercy, and forgive all our sins that we may serve you in true freedom (Worship 1195)."

A second structure which also defeats the internal power of confession is the focus on action. While the life-changing force of confession lies in the telling of a story, in the fictional narrative, Catholic doctrine advocates outward action as a necessary part of the process. The Catechism states: "Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin . . . It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear (1459-60)." Confession thus enters the objective realm, greatly

reducing its power. The mystery is gone, the Panopticon's tower is transparent, nothing is hidden. Without this "unknown watchful presence," the prison, and confession as well, fail in their goal of self-regulation.

The Protestant Reformation brought the doctrine of confession to new ground. This new branch of Christianity allowed for much more individuality, independence, and self-conviction. These things greatly affected the Church's view of confession. The most important change made by the Protestant Church is the rejection of the necessity of a priest for confession. In the Protestant tradition, confession is an issue between God and the individual; the middle man is cast out, leaving a direct, personal path to God:

But we believe that this sincere confession which is made to God alone is sufficient, and that in order to obtain forgiveness of sins it is not necessary for anyone to confess his sins to a priest . . . because there is neither a commandment nor an example of this in Holy Scriptures (Book of Confessions 5.095).

With no existing priest, this form of confession seems to be a closer rendition of the Panopticon ideal. The central tower cloaks the existence of an external surveyor, making it impossible for the prisoners to know if they are being watched or not; thus they live as though they are always observed. In the same way, confession is made to a mysterious, invisible God, a being who is always watching but never seen. By making confession more individual in nature, the Protestant Church allows the self-regulating, internal power of confession to

flourish.

While the majority of confessions might be heard within the Church structure, traces of the fictional narrative exist in the secular arena as well. Talk shows, newspaper personals, and, sadly, even 900 numbers are beginning to replace the sanctity of confession with a cheap, watered-down rendition. Some organizations, however, have found ways to incorporate the power of confession in a more positive manner. One example, the fourth and final part of society discussed here, is the realm of recovery groups. Alcoholics Anonymous has been around since 1935, helping people defeat the addiction of alcohol. Looking into its system, one can see a definite Christian-based, confession-based ideology at work. To start with, one can look at the Big Book (A.A.'s Bible), at its concept of alcoholism:

We alcoholics are men and women who have lost the ability to control our drinking. We know that no real alcoholic ever recovers control. All of us felt at times that we were regaining control, but such intervals -- usually brief -- were followed by still less control, which led in time to pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization (Smith 697).

This acknowledgment of weakness, of dependency, finds its strength in the act of confession, which permeates several of the twelve steps of the A.A. program. The first step advocates the idea of sinfulness, of impurity which necessitates cleansing from a "higher power." By admitting powerlessness, one is led towards the conviction of sin -- not sins, but Sin, the underlying, inescapable power that leads to sins -- required

for anyone who would accept the grace of God [the "higher power"] (Stafford 17). Steps four and five work together to form an unmistakably Christian-based hail to confess: "4) Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves; 5) Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs (Smith 698)." Obviously confession is central to such groups as Alcoholics Anonymous; this fact has brought about attacks from numerous anti-theists. They argue that A.A. upholds the "false" notion of the dependence of humans upon another being. No one can argue, however, against the testimonies of ex-alcoholics who have gained a second chance through A.A.'s self-narrative basis.

Within A.A.'s use of confession, however, there exists both strengths and weaknesses. It's obvious strength is its focus on confession as a foundational step in the breaking of an addiction. The healing process begins with openness, humility, and the telling of one's life story, a definite parallel to Saint Augustine's journey of salvation. A.A.'s major weakness, as with other recovery groups, lies in its "twelve step" process. Like the Catholic Church, which tends to exert more external authority, A.A. imposes a set of outside rules in order to regulate individuals. Thus, it could be argued, such precepts thwart the Panopticon ideal of self-regulation.

It began with a command from God and continued through

a humble saint from North Africa; it is rooted in the Church's foundation, and today the secular world cashes in on it as well. Confession, the telling of a story, wields its power worldwide, affecting and changing the lives of people of every nation. The irony, however, lies in its location of power. Like Foucault's Panopticon, the reality of confession exists in the introspective fiction, the autobiography, rather than in the objective realm.

I could rattle off facts and figures or tell inspiring stories of famous confessors, but I won't. Instead, I share now the one thing I am sure about: the power of confession in my own life. By opening my heart to Jesus, humbling myself, and searching every dark corner of my heart, I have been changed, "regulated" by confession's might. In telling my story, giving my self-narrative, Christ fulfilled his promise when he said "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Mt. 11:28)." The power of confession is open to all people who are willing to humbly and openly search their hearts, and with cries of sorrow share the narrative of their life. Out of this true artistic masterpiece, this confession, people are transformed, new lives are begun, and new hope is reborn.

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