EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN: THE VIRTUE OF CONFESSION

OPENING PRAYER

One person may read this aloud for the group, or you may decide to pray it aloud together.

Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning. And so we humans, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you—we who carry our mortality about with us, carry the evidence of our sins and with it the proof that you thwart the proud. Yet these humans due part of your creation as they are, still do long to praise you. You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. Amen.

(Augustine, The Confessions, I.1)

READINGS AND REFLECTIONS

You may decide to read (aloud or to yourselves) all of the three following prayers, or you may decide to focus on one and leave the other two for a different conversation.

Reading I: Penitential Rite (Confiteor)

I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault; therefore, I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin, all the Angels and Saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God.
Reading II: The Gloria

Glory to God in the highest,  
And on earth peace to people of good will,  
We praise you,  
We bless you,  
We adore you,  
We glorify you,  
We give you thanks for your great glory,  
Lord God, heavenly King,  
O God, almighty Father,  
Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son,  
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,  
You take away the sins of the world,  
have mercy on us;  
you take away the sins of the world,  
receive our prayer;  
you are seated at the right hand of the Father;  
have mercy on us;  
For you alone are the Holy One,  
you alone are the Lord,  
you alone are the Most High,  
Jesus Christ,  
with the Holy Spirit,  
in the glory of God the Father.  
Amen.

Reading III: The Creed

I believe in one God,  
the Father almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all things visible and invisible.  
I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Only Begotten Son of God,  
born of the Father before all ages.  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;  
through him all things were made.  
For us men and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,  
and became man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,  
he suffered death and was buried,  
and rose again on the third day  
in accordance with the Scriptures.  
He ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory  
to judge the living and the dead  
and his kingdom will have no end.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.  
I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.  
I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins
and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Reflection

Today, confession is generally reserved for moments of transgression or sinfulness, as when, for example, a criminal who has stolen items from a home confesses his or her guilt for the crime. The Catholic waits in line at the church to enter the confessional where he or she publicly confesses sin. By contrast, in early Christianity there were three types of confession: confession of sin, of praise, and of faith. In this sense, confession is simply an act of acknowledgment. So any Notre Dame undergraduate who, at the conclusion of a football game, remains in the student section swaying to Notre Dame, Our Mother (whether after a crushing loss or an exhilarating win) "confesses" his or her identity as a Notre Dame student. Implicitly, in this ritual moment, the student proclaims his or her relationship not only to the University but to all those gathered in the stadium on that majestic Saturday, and of course, not only to those gathered that day but to the great chorus of voices throughout time who have performed this same hymn.

In the Mass, we participate in the words of confession so important to our forebears. We stand before the assembly and confess our sinfulness in the Confiteor. Indeed, like Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis, we have fallen victim to the sin of pride. Pride is not the same as a healthy self-esteem (this is a good, never a sin) but a tendency to perceive our own ordering of the universe as superior to God’s. When we feel sorrow at the success of our neighbor down the hall, rather than rejoicing in their accomplishment, we manifest pride. When we treat a man or woman as an object of our sexual desire, rather than a creature made in the image and likeness of God, we manifest pride. When we cheat on an exam, rationalizing it as "not that bad," we manifest pride. The medicine for this pride is to acknowledge our sins before God, each other, and the saints; to counter our desire to perceive ourselves as gods through an acknowledgment of our status as created by a loving God. Self-giving love represents the divine order of things.

And as we confess our sins, the only proper response is to praise the Lord: Glory to God in the highest and peace to people of good will. The Gloria is the song of the Christian, who can perceive all of existence as a hymn to God. In the Gospel of Luke, the angels sing these words to the shepherds gathered in the fields, watching their flocks by night. In the midst of their normal business of shepherding, an angel of the Lord stands before them announcing the birth of the savior of the world: "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12). In this humble sign, a child swaddled for protection from the elements, born among beasts and yet honored by kings, is the savior of the world: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to people of good will. A tiny baby filled his mother’s breasts with milk as the Word of God and now drinks deeply from this fullness, tasting all that it means to be human. We call this tiny, humble, powerless manifestation of God the “scandal of the Incarnation.” The truth that God chooses to become incarnate – one of us in our flesh and human weakness – is shocking! It’s so unbelievable we call it a scandal. God, through Jesus, shows us strength in such humility, wonder in lowliness, power in weakness. By singing the words of the Gloria, we confess this reality. Again, self-giving love represents the divine order of things.
The **Creed** is the symbolic language of God’s love story with humanity, culminating in the Son born in human flesh as a sign of authentic human existence. Still, what about the words of the Creed? They sound stilted and devoid of prayer. Begotten. Consubstantial. Processing. Could we not cut these terms out, while keeping the more poetic language, such as “Light from Light, true God from true God”? Ironically, to cut out the words which seem most stilted and forced will remove the power of the Creed.

After the life, death and resurrection of Christ, our ancestors in faith had to articulate the relationship between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. How could they express this? How could they maintain the unity of the one God, while simultaneously recognizing the power of the Son and the Holy Spirit, each persons in that one God? They used the tools and terminology of philosophy – generation, being, substance, procession – to express a relationship unfathomable to the human mind. They expanded these terms, using them in ways they had never been used before. They recognized the limitations of their language. The Son is begotten from the Father but not in any way that we can understand. The Holy Spirit processes from the Father in a way not like anything we know.

We shouldn’t be surprised that human language fails to adequately express certain relationships. When a wife tells her husband that she loves him and he responds with words of love, this exchange, while important, does not completely express or make real their love. They are merely words, words which are limited. Yet these limited words demand a radical new way of living. The love between a husband and wife should be a love that changes the way in which they view the world and the way they live. The love itself, and the living out of it, reveals and transforms the reality of the world.

The words of the Creed, even those which seem stiff or antiquated to us, do the same thing. They express a relationship, which allows the Triune (“three-in-one”) God to have a power in our lives. And they had to be more than just a statement of belief; they had to attempt to answer what it means to be baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They touch against the edge of mystery, which we will never know completely but which we must continue to explore in love and hope. And for this reason, the words of the Creed are love poetry, which the Church has confessed to her beloved from age-to-age. Self-giving love represents the divine order of things.

Thus, the true wonder of confessing our sins (the *Confiteor*), our praise (the *Gloria*), and our faith (the Creed) in the Mass is that we ourselves are to become a living confession of the divine. We are called to be an acknowledgement of the Christ who transforms us as we participate in the Eucharistic liturgy. Confession, or acknowledgement, of our deep connection to God and each other will form us more closely into disciples of Christ: into people who offer self-giving love.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. What struck you most about the new words in each of these prayers? What, if any, new insights did they bring? What do you find most attractive?

2. Have you ever heard the phrase, “God is God and you’re not”? When do you find you just want to be a little too much in charge? Where in your life do you struggle to perceive yourself as creature and not Creator?
3. Think for a moment about your day-to-day activities. What do you do explicitly each day to “confess” – that is, acknowledge – God (either in word or in deed)? Do such words and deeds of confession transform your relationship with God? With your neighbor?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Individually:
At the end of each day, practice this daily examen, a prayer inspired by the writings of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

1. Sit in silence, remembering that you are in the presence of God, and express gratitude for the day now passed.
2. Spend several moments having a conversation with God about your day, thinking over each moment as if watching a movie.
3. Ask yourself where in the day you experienced God’s love.
4. Consider those moments when such love was absent, either through something you did or someone did to you.
5. Ask God for forgiveness (either for yourself or for the person who sinned against you) and the strength to love more fully in each day.

As a community:
Can you make a commitment to your group to “confess” God in your lives by inviting others into your Emmaus group? You can ask your friends … or even better, invite people you don’t really know yet. Help them to feel welcome so that they, too, can find even more authentic relationships with God and with others.

CLOSING PRAYER
(leader or another member of the group)