

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL CONFESSION ·

by:

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On Saturday, we went to confession. Mine was a pretty standard operation: "Bless me, father, for I have sinned. It has been two months since my last confession. I did that thing I always do, and that other thing I always do. I also did that other thing I always do, except more so than usual. And I stopped doing that thing I usually do, but then I started again. And I was mean on the internet. For these and all my sins, I am truly sorry."

And the priest said what this particular priest always says: "Thank you for that beautiful confession." He says this when I have a long and sordid list, or a short and sordid list, or when he can barely understand me because my nose is running from the sordidness of it all. The point is, I am not aware of ever having made a confession that any normal human being would consider "beautiful."

But the confessional is not a normal place. It's the one place that no one would ever go for normal, worldly reasons. No penitent goes to confession to get ahead in life, or to make money, or to get a full belly, or to impress anyone; and no priest goes to confession to be amused or entertained. It's where we go to unload our miseries, to show our wounds and our infections, to take off the disguises that make us appear palatable to each other.

So, not beautiful. No, not especially.

Or is it? If the ugliness, the squalor, the sordidness and the running nose were all that happened inside a confessional, then it really would be an ugly place — just a latrine, a ditch, a sewer. But of course, the part where we lay out our sins is only the first part.

What happens afterward is more obviously beautiful. The priest reaches out and picks up the ugly little load you've laid in front of him. And right then and there, he pours the living water over it until the parts that are worth saving are healthy and whole again, and the parts that cannot be salvaged have been washed away entirely. What is useless is gone; what was dead is alive again.

This is beautiful!

And the beauty of absolution does one of those neat Catholic tricks where eternal things reach back in time and impart beauty wherever they want, regardless of chronology. The beauty of absolution makes the confession itself beautiful. Even though my sins are ugly, the very fact that I'm bringing them into the confessional has something beautiful in it: the beauty of trust that I

will be forgiven; the beauty of believing that something real and life-changing will happen; the beauty of being willing to accept forgiveness even though I know that I don't deserve it; and the beauty of knowing that, whoever's turn it is to sit behind the screen, it is really Christ who is waiting to meet me.

If that isn't beautiful, then nothing is.

The Cross that redeems us and brings us peace and pardon has a long shadow, and it stretches backward in time, covering us not only at the moment of absolution, but drawing us into its beautiful shelter of mercy from the very moment we decide: "This can't go on. I gotta get to confession for real this weekend."

So, all right, Father, my confession was beautiful! It's beautiful that you are willing to spend your weekends behind that screen, helping us turn our garbage into a garden. You were right. It was a beautiful confession.