

What's the one thing you've done that nobody else can ever know about? The mere thought about what your answer might be to this question may lead you to gasp or gulp, and it may even cause your heart to race. You can rest easy though, there are now quick and convenient, anonymous, and even aesthetic ways to deal with those nagging sins of yours. They are called cyberspace confessions.

Have some slip-ups to shake loose and can't make it down to the parish priest? No problem. Just have them absolved by posting them online at an e-confessional. You're just a few keystrokes away from a clean slate.

And if you're more of the artsy type who needs to get something off your chest? Cyber-reality has a perfect solution for you as well. There's a Web site called Postsecret.com where you can actually submit a postcard-sized artistic rendering of your transgression. Just include a statement of the issue that you need to reveal — and by all means —keep it anonymous. Eventually your mail-in confession will be posted on the site so others can read about your offense and admire the way you aesthetically captured it.

What a voyeuristic bonus! The rest of the world can get online and appreciate the splendor of your sinful actions. And consider the possible therapeutic benefits of people admitting their sins. Others can go look at the hideousness of what is confessed and instantly feel better about their own minor mishaps and pesky offenses.

Who needs a priest or a time of prayer anymore? And why bother with the cost of a therapist to improve your self-esteem? No need to visit the local art gallery. We can get all of those needs met in one place. Anonymous, artistic, confessional, and voyeuristic. It's no wonder then, that reality television shows tend to dominate the Nielsen ratings. We love to wallow in other people's garbage. It entertains us. It shocks us. It makes us feel better about ourselves.

Ok, so why not bring the same benefits to confession? Quick, easy, and tasty as well. It's McConfession for a McCulture. Okay. Critique is cheap and its easy, but we're in a lot of trouble if our Christian beliefs don't offer us something more tangible. More authentic. More personal. More real. And thankfully, our second lesson from 1st John gives us more!

As followers of Christ, we don't always acknowledge the fact that we generally tend to live within a false reality, in which we appear to be too comfortable and too silent. We Christians, who worship a God who is light, sometimes find ourselves carrying around dark things. We carry dark thoughts, dark words, dark emotions, dark actions, dark omissions.

The analogy we glean from a letter attributed to St. John is a great one! Walk into a room with the lights on and try to find a dark place. It will always be the farthest distance away from the light source. Or it will be in a shadow — a dark place that is hidden from the light. When we fall short of thinking, feeling, and acting in ways that reflect the perfection of God, we're like darkness in a lit room. Far from God. It's as if we are hiding from God.

Now, typically we view confession as “that Catholic thing” where people go to a priest. Or perhaps it was that one-time past activity that people associate with “praying a special prayer” or “receiving Christ” during something like an altar call. Or maybe it is just a hyper-pious activity for those monastic and self-abasing types —kind of like confessional cod liver oil: It's supposed to cure us, but we're not sure why.

But in today's passage, confession is different. It's a normal part of living in a healthy Christian rhythm. According to this morning's epistle, confession will “cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Not “cleanse” in the past tense. “Cleanse” in the present tense. In other words, it is an assumed ongoing activity. It's how

dark things close their distance from the light. It's how they come out of hiding. Confession creates a clean relationship.

*Blue Like Jazz* author Donald Miller offers an interesting perspective on confession. He and his friends went to a festival on their college campus, which was renowned for the drunkenness, nakedness, and drug consumption of the students who attended it. They went there to set up a confession booth.

But it had a twist. The booth was not a place to come and confess one's festival sins; rather it was a place to come and hear the confessions of the Christians who ran it. They recognized and apologized for all of the church's atrocities which stood against the message of Jesus Christ. The Crusades. Televangelists. Politicized religiosity. Neglect of the poor and marginalized in our society.

Pagan festival-goers came, fully aware of these blights upon the church. But at the confession booth, the church asked them for forgiveness. And their response varied from respect, to curiosity, tears, to appreciation, and was even therapeutic and healing for some.

It was not only a great missional opportunity, but it was also a great picture of the heart of confession found in 1 John 1. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The campus confession was admitting what a disenchanted audience of nonbelievers already knew about the church: It was sinful and imperfect.

When done right, our Christian confession is actually quite similar. When we confess our sins, we are merely owning up to the reality of the ways in which we have not perfectly followed Christ. Of course, God is already aware of our mistakes and failures, so confession isn't an information transfer; it's a form of relational healing. Confession restores us into a right relationship with God.

When we say something dumb to a spouse or a friend, things are a little stilted between us until we go and seek forgiveness. Our relationships with others tend to be awkward when there is an offense between people. And our relationship with God is no different when the wrongs we have committed against the Lord remain unrecognized and unreconciled.

But confession also has the ability to restore our relationship with other Christians as well. Coming out of the darkness and into the light grants us “fellowship with one another.” Confession places us back on the common ground of our identity in Christ — as his co-followers, not as his co-offenders. And our relationships with other believers can not only be the end of confession, but it can also be the means as well. James 5:16 says to “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

And yet, for some reason we tend to balk at such a radical concept. Everyone likes to have their stuff all together. People don’t like to be wrong. And for sure, nobody likes to admit they’re wrong even when they know they are. We’re consumed with being right and not getting right. If you are a fan of the old sitcom *Happy Days* you may recall the two words that the Fonz could never make pass over his lips: “I’m sorry.” He would stutter and stammer, but never get beyond “I’m s-s-s-so-so-so ...”

Thankfully, though, most of us are less-Fonz-esque and are able to apologize to one another when we have wronged each other. But how ridiculous is it for us to tell somebody else that we feel sorry when we wronged God? What does that person have to do with something between God and us? Well, apparently James and John both saw something very vital and important in our confessing to one another.

When you were a kid, did you ever lie awake at night believing there were monsters under your bed or in the closet? Or do your kids or grandkids have those

same fears today? Well, two things are true of those nocturnal fear-mongers: They lose their power when Mom and Dad or Grandpa or Grandma come into the room, and they lose their power when the lights get turned on.

Sin is the same kind of monster. It holds power and influence over us. It is tempting and attractive. It comes after us in dark places when nobody else is there. But when we tell other people about the sins we wrestle with, somebody else comes into the room, the lights get turned on, and the monster loses its teeth.

That is why e-confessionals, and sites like postsecret.com, are such tawdry rip-offs of the true spiritual rhythm of confession. Cyber-confession is anonymous. Christian confession is personal. Cyber-confession is the announcement of our wrongs to an impersonal online audience. Christian confession is an ownership of our wrongs to a personal God and to a caring people. Cyber-confession results in entertainment for others. Christian confession results in our connection with others.

I invite you to listen to the rich words of a familiar confessional liturgy:  
*Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your name. Amen.*

These emotional words are not considered to be a form of online entertainment. Rather they reveal to us what real Christian intimacy is all about. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.