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An Imaginary Confession

By Father Antoninus Wall, O.P.

The voice coming from the other side of the confessional screen was that of a woman. She identified herself as a wife and mother of three daughters. She told the confessor that she was in her late forties. The confession proceeded like so many others without anything out of the ordinary. When she came to the end of confessing sins committed since her last confession one month previously, she paused and then asked for permission to go into a situation which other confessors had advised her to avoid in confession unless she had a special reason to bring it up. She felt that she had such a reason, but was ready to do whatever the confessor advised. He told her to proceed and she did.

PENITENT. Father, thirty years ago when I was still a teenager and quite ignorant about life, I briefly became romantically involved with a young man. This led to my becoming pregnant. The young man dropped me and I was left in a state of panic. Those who knew of my situation strongly advised me to have an abortion. For a period of time I resisted this advice. Finally, frightened and ignorant, I did have the abortion.

Shortly after the abortion I went to confession to a kindly priest. He informed me that my ignorance and emotional state softened my guilt in what I had done. He spoke about the infinite love and mercy of God the Father, and assured me that I had been forgiven. In spite of the reassurance of this priest for a long time following the abortion I continued in a state of shock. I was withdrawn, and ridden with guilt. Four years later I met my husband. He was my salvation. He helped me to return to the real world again, but the feelings of guilt remained.

In time I became the mother of three beautiful girls and their presence somewhat distracted me from my guilty feelings. However, the fact that my aborted child was a female, as I was informed at the time of the abortion, makes the presence of my daughters a mixed blessing. Periodically the guilty feelings return and I find myself bringing up this matter in confession, as I am presently doing. Whenever I mention my guilt in confession I am assured that God has forgiven me. And I believe He has. The problem is that I can't forgive myself. It is all well and good that I have been forgiven, but what about my poor child who never had a chance to experience life. Every time something special happens to one of my daughters, - a birthday, a first communion, a graduation, a first prom, - I think of my child who was denied this joy.

During the last seven years my spiritual growth has been significant. I find myself attending Mass daily. I even say the Divine Office, and spend significant time reading spiritual books and meditating. What puzzles me is the fact that the closer I come to

God, the more I am haunted by the memory of my child. My growing closeness to God makes me even more conscious of my child and the harm I did to her. Rather than easing the pain, it intensifies the pain. I keep trying to block out the memory of my child in obedience to my confessors, but I can't.

CONFESSOR. You should never block out the memory of your child. The love in your heart for your child and your concern for her well being is a love that God places in you. Your love for your child is a pale reflection of God's far greater love and concern for her. That is why the closer you come to God and the more God's love grows in your heart, the stronger becomes your love for your child and the more intense becomes your concern for her happiness. The two are intimately connected. In your love for your child, you are experiencing God's love for her. The pain coming out of your love for your child is the price you pay for your experience of God's love for her. In this sense, it should be a welcomed and reassuring pain.

PENITENT. If God loves my child more than even I love her, Father, why would God have allowed me to do what I did? Why would He not have stopped me from proceeding with the abortion?

CONFESSOR. That is not an easy question to answer. Our best insight into why God allows the innocent to suffer comes from the death of Christ on the cross. If ever God should have intervened to stop the death of an innocent, it was when His own son was being crucified. However, if God did intervene at that time and brought the unjust crucifixion of His son to a halt, He would have snipped in the bud the most perfect act of love that will ever come out of a human. Christ's death on the cross gives birth to divine love in this world in a radically new way. His death is the key to the salvation of the world. By his death Christ teaches us that God the Father would never allow the suffering of an innocent for one moment, unless that suffering were to be the occasion of a good that totally transcends the evil permitted.

PENITENT. But what possible good can come out of the death of my daughter?

CONFESSOR. I can only speculate on that with you. How, for example, does the memory of your daughter's death affect your relations with your three daughters who, by the way, are her sisters?

PENITENT. Father, I am so grateful to God for giving me the three jewels that I have in my daughters after what I did to my first child. I look upon them as pure gifts of God. I feel so unworthy of them after what I had done. I thank God daily for their presence in my life and I continually ask God to make me a worthy mother for them.

CONFESSOR. Don't you see how your deceased child is sanctifying you as a mother to your children? The memory of your child's death is making you far more conscious than otherwise you would be, that your children are more God's children than your own. How different would your role as a mother to your children be were it not for the memory of your first child? Now, let me ask you another question. Does the memory of your first child's death impact in anyway on your relations with your husband?

PENITENT. It does in all kinds of ways. My husband is a wonderful spouse and father. I am so grateful to God for giving me so ideal a person to love my children and myself. Here again, as with my children, I feel unworthy of such a husband after what I had done.

CONFESSOR. Once more you are describing how your child is deeply affecting the quality of your love for your husband, and sanctifying your love for him. Would that love have the same qualities if you did not have the memory of the death of your daughter daily in mind? Now, can you tell me of other affects in your life that have been and are being influenced by the memory of your child?

PENITENT. Father, I could go on and on about the changes in my life coming from the memory of my abortion. For example, I find myself strongly pro-life, and I identify with the children and their mothers who daily experience the horrors of abortion. I pray always for them. I also find myself far less judgmental of the weaknesses of others, and compassionate toward them in their failings. I easily identify with sinners since I look upon myself as one of the worst. I particular find myself involved with single mothers and the effort to arrange adoptions as an alternative to abortion. As I say, Father, I could go on and on listing the effects that the memory of my aborted child has on my daily life.

CONFESSOR. You are describing to me all kinds of graces coming into your life out of the memory of the death of your child. These are graces that would not be there in the absence of that memory with the guilt and pain you associate with it. Now, this is the most important point I wish to make to you. It is inconceivable that God would use an innocent child as the source of grace and sanctification of another human being, without that child participating fully in the graces granted. You can be certain that the mission of your child is your sanctification as a mother and wife, as well as the sanctification of your children and husband. The more you experience the graces flowing into your life from your child, the more assurance you will have that your child at this very moment enjoys a extraordinary place in God's love.

For your penance I want you to give your child a name, if you have already not done so. Then spend time with her asking once again her forgiveness. Tell your child that from this moment onward you are going to ask her daily to intercede with Christ for you and your family in order to help all of you grow in holiness. The more active she becomes in your daily life, and the more you allow her to influence in a positive way every moment of your existence, the closer she will become to you. Tell her that you are willing to endure the pain of keeping her daily in mind as the small price you pay to allow her to carry out her mission in your life. Tell her that you accept that pain in union with the sufferings of Christ as your way of sharing in his healing love for the world. Then you will begin to understand better why God allowed her life to be taken. You will understand this just as you understand why God allowed the life of His Son to be taken. The death of your daughter and the death of Christ are all part of one and the same mystery. You can be sure that this is the special mission that God intended for your child when He first granted her the gift of life in your womb. God has given her to you as a special saint for your family. Put her to work.

SOME THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THIS IMAGINARY CONFESSION.

The advice given to this penitent by the confessor is inspired by a number of truths embraced in the Catholic faith. Let me identify some of these truths.

1. The love in the mother's heart for her aborted child is a love that God placed in her. Now God could not put this love in her if His love for her child were not even greater than her own love. In the penitent's love and concern for her child she is experiencing a weak reflection of God's far greater love and concern for her daughter.

2. From the psychological point of view the mother experiences her love for her child as coming solely from herself. That love is so intimately, personally, uniquely experienced as coming from the depths of her being, it is almost impossible for her to recognize that God is the source of her love. Yet Catholic faith celebrates the truth that God is the ultimate source of all perfections. Since no perfection is greater than love, in a most special manner God is recognized as the ultimate source of the love in any person's heart for another. This truth applies to the penitent's love for her child.

3. Since the love in this mother's heart for her child has God as its source, the more God's love grows in her heart, the greater becomes her love and concern for her child. This is why the Confessor points out correctly to her that her own spiritual growth brings with it an intensified concern for her child. The pain coming out of this growing concern for her child is the price she is asked to pay for drawing closer to God. It is good pain. It is healthy pain. When united to the sufferings of Christ it becomes 'birthing' pain.

4. In God's plan the painful memory of this mother regarding her aborted child becomes the instrument through which God effects the sanctification of the mother. In fact, the child's primary mission is the sanctification of her mother. Catholic faith teaches that God only permits an evil to take place when He can use that evil as the occasion to bring about a good that immeasurably transcends the evil involved. This is the lesson we learn from God the Father's allowing His innocent Son to be crucified. From that seemingly useless, meaningless event comes the most perfect act of love that will ever be elicited by a human. When the mother unites her sufferings at the death of her child to the sufferings of Christ, the child becomes the instrument through which Christ gives birth to God's love in the mother as he gave birth by his death to the Father's love in this world.

5. As the Confessor pointed out to the penitent, it is inconceivable that God would allow an innocent to be the source of precious grace to another without that innocent sharing fully in the graces bestowed. Therefore the more the mother grows in holiness through uniting the sufferings coming out of her memory of her child with the sufferings of Christ, the more she can be certain that her child enjoys an extraordinary place in God's love.

7. Unless the mother experiences the actual flow of God's love into her life coming out of her child's death, she will never be able to understand and accept the meaningfulness of her child's death and the role that she played in it. It is only because we experience daily the graces flowing into our world from the death of Christ that we are able to affirm

confidently that God's love was in control on Calvary. Likewise it is to the extent that the mother experiences in her daily life the graces and spiritual fruit coming out of the death of her child that she will accept the wisdom and love at work in what otherwise seems to be a meaningless, tragic event. Only then can she see her child through God's eyes as the one chosen by Him to open the gates of heaven to her and her loved ones.

8. The confessor's advice does not come from any special theory about the destiny of aborted and miscarried infants who die without the sacrament of Baptism. Theologians dispute these matters. Rather the confessor's advice is based on the positive circumstances of this case. Among other factors influencing his counsel are the following:

- The fact that the more God's love grows in the mother the greater becomes her love and concern for her child;
- The confessor's certitude that God's love for the child is the source of the mother's love;
- The positive, sanctifying affects in the mother, which come from the memory of the child;
- The confessor's conviction that God would not use an innocent child as the instrument of sanctification of another without the child participating fully in the graces bestowed. The case of the 'holy innocents' comes to his mind.

9. The penitent should be reminded of the teaching of Catholic faith about life beyond the grave and the resurrection of the body. In the light of that teaching she should know that her daughter is very much alive and that Christ came to save the whole of her, body and soul. As the mother grows in the love of God with the assistance of graces coming from her daughter, she also can look forward to the time when she will see with her eyes the fully mature, youthful, glorified body of her daughter radiating the beauty of her soul. She will hear her voice, and reach out and touch and embrace her, and thank her for the indispensable role that she exercised in her mother's salvation.



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