Confession

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Abstract

WHILE Ruth examined her conscience, sun rays through the church’s quatrefoil windows formed bright color pattern on the altar, among the pews and on the cold gray walls.
WHILE Ruth examined her conscience, sun rays through the church's quatrefoil windows formed bright color pattern on the altar, among the pews and on the cold gray walls. People lined up in the shadowed cloisters before each confessional would delay just a trifle longer her own confession. Ruth stared at the crucifix above the sanctuary and read the Latin phrase emblazoned on its supporting redwood beam.

This place is holy.
Yes, it is holy and I am here.
Why are you here, Ruth?
To confess.
What will you confess, Ruth?
Bless me, Father, I have sinned—
Ruth shivered and opened her eyes. Her hands were warm together. Her eyes strayed to the white statue of the Virgin. Hail, Mary, full of grace . . . blessed art thou among women.

Ruth, Ruth, hast thou forsaken me?
Have I? Is it wrong to love? I have loved. I love. Is it wrong?
The white Virgin blurred, Ruth closed her eyes; they burned and were damp.

For weeks the children practiced for their first Confession and Holy Communion. They made a practice confession. The nuns told the children to make up tiny sins for practice; in the confessional, the priest coached them.

“Bless me, Father—” Ruth began in the new, strange, musty darkness of the confessional, but her voice caught.

“Bless me, Father, I have sinned.” The priest helped her.
"Bless me, Father, I have sinned. This is my first confession. One time I told a lie." Words came in a rush.

“All right, that’s good enough for practice. You’ll remember, now, when you make your real confession, won’t you?”

“Yes, Father. Thank you, Father.”

But her first confession was not different; Ruth could think of no real sins, so she made some up. The priest gave her absolution and Ruth knelt to bury her face in her hands to say her penance as the nuns had instructed her; but she felt empty, strangely alone in the child-filled church.

There were practice processions and then the real procession of first Holy Communion with the little boys in dark jackets and the little girls with film-white veils and bright white satin dresses. There was the first fast and little growling hunger, the flat-tasting Eucharist; and then alone in the park on her way home after her first Holy Communion, Ruth wretched violently from hunger and lay with her face in the grass smelling the earth through strange, burning, unwelcome, bewildering tears.

The children were required to attend daily Mass during the school year and when Ruth grew older she never missed Sunday Mass.

Kyrie, eleison.
Lord, have mercy on us.
Christe, eleison.
Christ, have mercy on us.

Kneeling at Benediction of the Holy Sacrament, Ruth was mystified by the smell of incense. She looked at the enshrined Eucharist and prayed fervently, but her prayers would fade with the coming of questions.

Is God really there in the priest’s robed hands?
Is he, Ruth? What do you think?
Then, chanting, “O salutaris hostia,” or “Tantum ergo Sacramentum,” Ruth would feel a chill at the powerful sounds.
Blessed be God.
Blessed be his Holy Name.
Blessed be his Holy Name.
Gnawing, self-embarrassing questions came to Ruth: she never quite believed. When she was confirmed, no Holy Ghost came as she thought he would; then she felt lost, left out, alone. But still she performed the reverent actions. She tried over and over to know God, to love Him, to feel His love. Nothing came.

After finishing a Catholic girl's high school, Ruth went to a Catholic university, where she learned logic, metaphysics and ethics. Gradually the religion which had been meaningless to her grew purposeful. One by one the painful years of empty prayers and strict dogma were forgotten; she still failed to grasp the spirit of God's being through the Church; but with her mind, Ruth eventually saw the essence of goodness in the Church; with her mind she found the strength of goodness in herself.

Living as the Church teaches is a good way to live.
Is it, Ruth?
Yes; but I will live the way I feel is best for me to live, always.
You will, Ruth?
Yes! Oh, yes!
But still there is something missing.
There is! Yes, oh, yes, there is!
What is missing, Ruth?
I don't know. I don't know.

The lines at the confessionals had considerably shortened. Shadows, at first sharp, were now hazy in the church, not shadows, but gloom. Ruth dreaded the confessional: kneeling in the curtained closet waiting for the slide of the panel separating the priest from her, then she would have to tell him.
Bless me, Father, I have sinned.
You have sinned?
Yes.
How have you sinned?
I have sinned with my lover.

Ruth had met him in one of her classes during the summer session of her college. For a long while she stared,
then he turned and Ruth flushed. She opened her book. When she looked up again he was still looking at her, his eyes were very blue. He smiled and Ruth smiled.

After that first class he said he would come for her in the evening and they would go to the beach; it would be warm in the evening; he said his name was Joe and he asked what her name was.

She told him.

“That’s a very nice name.” Then he started away from her for another class.

Ruth felt dizzied. She ran after him through the crowded hall.

“Joe! Wait!”
He waited.

“You don’t know where I live.”
He smiled foolishly. “That’s important, isn’t it? Where do you live, Ruth?”
She told him.

They stood for a long moment looking at one another, half-smiling, joyfully.

Then he said, “I’ll see you tonight,” and was gone.

Ruth knew many boys; she had let very few kiss her. She wanted this one to kiss her in the crowded hallway then.

She almost ran after him again.

That night Ruth and Joe swam hard, then lay on their towels in the sand. They talked.

“You have a beautiful face, Ruth.”
Nothing missing.
Ruth laughed. “My eyes burn from the water; stroke my eyes, Joe.”
He stroked her eyes.

“That feels good.”
“I’m glad you like it. You have such smooth skin.” He stroked her forehead, her cheeks, her lips.

“That feels good.”

“Has no one ever stroked your face, Ruth?”
“No.”

“Has no one ever loved you?”
“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Have you ever loved anyone, Ruth?”
Blessed be God.
Blessed be His Holy Name.
“No.”
“I love you, Ruth.”
“I love you.”
Nothing missing?
Oh! No, no!
“Oh, I love you!”

Gentle love; dark sky, swinging stars; love gently; firm, soft, yielding sand; gently, love; quiet-lapping lake water; loving gently; sweet warm breath of night; lover, gently.

Now in the church, Ruth’s heart was quiet, her head was clear and her eyes no longer felt swollen with sadness. There were now only a few people at the confessional.

You know what the priest will say when you tell him, Ruth?
He will ask if marriage is possible.
What will you say?
I will say that I don’t know.
You don’t know?
No.
Don’t you care if marriage is possible?
No.
Then why are you here, Ruth?
Startling, sharp, clear discovery:
I don’t know, I don’t know why I am here.
Where should you be, Ruth?

With him: with Joe, with him I love; with Joe, who loves me; where we love, everywhere we love, anywhere; with him, together. Not here with a God I never knew, who never knew me.

Ruth left the church. A block away she stopped on the corner and looked back. In the diffused light of late-afternoon sun she saw each brick, every niche, all the majesty and beauty of the church, and the emptiness which it held for her.

No more. Goodbye.
No more? Goodbye?
No more am I alone: I live. Goodbye.

—Richard Carroll, Engr. Sr.