

Article

Obedience as Belonging: Catholic Guilt and Frequent Confession in America

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Abstract: From the late 19th to the mid-20th century, the practice of private confession to a priest was a mainstay of Catholic parish life in the United States. By the 1970s, Catholics had largely abandoned the practice of private confession. One dominant narrative among Catholic theologians and clergy, identified chiefly with the papacy of John Paul II, attributes the decline in confession to the loss of healthy guilt that took place during the cultural upheaval of the 1960s. In conversation with the work of psychologist and philosopher Antoine Vergote, the present article challenges this narrative, arguing that a collective and unhealthy Catholic guilt existed among American Catholics well before the 1960s and in fact characterized the period in which private confession was practiced most frequently. I contend that obedience to moral prescriptions was not, for ordinary Catholics, part of an ethical program of self-reform but the condition for belonging to a church body that emphasized obedience. Finally, examining the relationship between weekly reception of communion and confession, I suggest that private confession emerged to support frequent communion, persisting only until the latter became standard practice among Catholics in the United States.

Keywords: sacramental theology; Roman Catholic Church; confession; sacrament of penance; Catholic guilt; psychoanalysis; moral theology; history of Catholicism in the United States; frequent communion; Antoine Vergote

1. Introduction

In a 1953 address to an international meeting of psychotherapists and psychologists, Pope Pius XII warned that curing a patient's guilt feelings does not necessarily remove the moral fault that produced them. Nonetheless, the pontiff allowed for a distinction between a "healthy guilt," a person's sensitive awareness of having violated what is known to be a law given by God for our own good, and what he describes as "an irrational and even morbid sense of guilt" (Pius XII 1953, nos. 34–37). In making this distinction, Pius XII recognized in the psychoanalytic sciences grounds for a certain autonomy from theology and church governance, provided that analysts and clinicians take responsibility for the moral implications of any counsels they might offer to their patients and recognize the limits of their interventions.

Therapists and clergy share a common concern for human guilt, but they often diverge on its origins, its usefulness, and its prognosis. What was surely on the mind of Pius XII was the likelihood of confusion about the role of the psychotherapist and the role of the priest as confessor. The Roman Catholic Church for centuries had taught that sins are forgiven through the celebration of the sacrament of penance, popularly called "confession."¹ This ritual exchange, which was understood to mediate

¹ In accord with the decrees of the 4th Lateran Council, the 16th century Council of Trent affirmed that priests and bishops alone have the power to absolve individuals of mortal sins, and that individual confession and absolution is the ordinary and necessary means by which God effectively forgives sins.

God's forgiveness and healing, consisted of an exchange between the penitent, who made a verbal, usually brief, confession of specific wrongdoings, and the priest, who responded by assigning a short "penance," commonly the recitation of familiar prayers like the Hail Mary or Our Father, and then by speaking a formula of absolution. According to Catholic teaching, the priest's absolution, together with the penitent's contrition, objectively removes the guilt that the penitent had incurred through sin.

With the growing popularization of psychotherapy and clinical psychology, Catholic clergy and theologians had to contend with an ambiguity between guilt feelings and the assurance of forgiveness. As Pius XII pointed out, to cure guilt feelings by means of psychotherapy does not mean that the sins of the patient are forgiven. Conversely, a priest's absolution of a penitent in the confessional leaves open the possibility that feelings of guilt might remain. The pope's tentative solution was to make a distinction between a "healthy"—that is, rational—guilt that presumably was removed by private confession to a priest, and an irrational and unhealthy guilt that the priest's absolution could not remove and which might become the object of psychotherapeutic intervention. Confession for healthy guilt, therapy for unhealthy guilt.

Thirty years later, Pope John Paul II repeated his predecessor's warnings about unhealthy guilt in *Reconciliation and Penance*, an apostolic exhortation written in order to reaffirm for Catholics throughout the world the importance, indeed the necessity, of private confession to a priest (John Paul II 1984). The occasion for this document's promulgation was a 1983 synod of bishops convened to discuss a dramatic and, to many, threatening trend: since the latter half of the 1960s, Catholics all over the world, who by all accounts had been going to confession frequently and habitually, had abruptly abandoned the practice. In his exhortation, meant to serve as summary response to the synod's findings, John Paul II attributes the decline in confession to the widespread disappearance of what he terms a "sense of sin" among the Catholic faithful. Echoing Pius XII, John Paul II distinguishes this "sense of sin" from a "morbid feeling of guilt," and also from awareness of "the mere transgression of legal norms and precepts" (John Paul II 1984, no. 16). Ignoring the warnings of Pius XII, the growing therapeutic movement had stepped beyond its proper role in the treatment of pathological feelings, and a widespread preference for therapy over religion had contributed to an epidemic of unhealthy guilt. Pathological forms of moral awareness subsumed the proper role of an authentic and legitimate sense of guilt, in part due to the rise of modern psychology, but also to deficiencies within educational systems, family life, and the mass media. This massive cultural decline, said the pope, had precipitated a crisis in confession by attacking the sense of sin that had motivated Catholics to frequent the confessional for generations.

John Paul II identified this rapid decline of private confession with a corresponding crisis of healthy Catholic guilt, and for decades bishops, priests, and Catholic lay apologists have taken up the chorus.² Other theological evaluations of the crisis were mixed.³ For instance, like John Paul II, Monika Hellwig, a prolific theologian who took part in the Second Vatican Council, blamed an overly therapeutic and ego-driven culture for the loss of healthy guilt, but she was less pessimistic about the decline of private confession (Hellwig 1982). Liturgical theologian James Dallen celebrated the decline as a moral coming of age in which people are finally replacing a futile and moralistic sense of guilt with healthy communal bonds (Dallen 1986). Priest and theologian David Coffey more soberly attributes the crisis in confession to a pedagogical failure on the part of the church to communicate a coherent understanding of sin in light of changes in moral theological thinking (Coffey 2001). What these otherwise diverging theological evaluations of sacrament penance all share is a conviction that

² For just a handful of recent examples from the Catholic hierarchy, see (Tartaglia 2015; Benedict XVI 2011; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2013; Francis 2019).

³ The theological literature on penance during this time period is expansive. For a sampling, see (Collins et al. 1987; Dallen 1986; Hellwig 1982; Mitchell 1978). For a more recent treatment, see (Coffey 2001).

something crucial had shifted, and that the shift had dramatic implications on psychological, cultural, and religious levels.⁴

Thus, in this article, I want to evaluate the narrative about the decline of confession embodied in texts like John Paul II's *Reconciliation and Penance* by examining the significance and role of private confession in the cultural and psychological matrices of American Catholic life before the Second Vatican Council.⁵ Adopting an approach to the distinction between healthy and unhealthy guilt based on the work of philosopher and psychologist Antoine Vergote, I will appraise the "sense of sin" cultivated among the Catholic laity from the 18th to the early 20th centuries, the period in which frequent private confession emerged. A careful examination of the rise of frequent private confession in early American Catholicism cannot support the claim that a widespread and healthy sense of sin had declined in favor of its pathological alternatives. Rather, by examining the ritualization of these guilt feelings with attention to the growing practice of frequent communion, I argue that private confession appealed to ordinary Catholics who accepted guilt as condition of belonging to a church that expressed the tension between sinfulness and moral purity in simplistic and juridical terms. As the reception of communion emerged as a constitutive aspect of weekly parish life, frequent confession offered the laity a way to negotiate the tension between their sense of unworthiness and their desire to receive the eucharist by allowing the ritual manifestation of obedience to substitute for purity.

2. Healthy and Unhealthy Guilt in Religious Practice

By invoking a distinction between healthy and unhealthy forms of guilt, Catholic religious authorities like Pius XII and John Paul II drew attention to shifting boundaries between psychological and religious perspectives on health, and they directed the Catholic faithful to allow religious belief, ritual, and practice to inform their ideas about healthy and unhealthy guilt feelings. In so doing, the hierarchy attempted to safeguard a practice that it considered vital on both religious and psychological grounds. Indeed, despite his reservations about the modern social sciences, John Paul recognized that further progress in understanding and evaluating the current status of Catholic penitential practice requires the participation of other disciplinary methods of inquiry like psychology (John Paul II 1984, p. 17). Hence, an effective concrete implementation of the church's pastoral and catechetical ministry of reconciliation requires a synthesis of Biblical and theological principles with "elements of psychology, sociology and the other human sciences, which can serve to clarify situations, describe problems accurately and persuade listeners or readers to make concrete resolutions" (John Paul II 1984, p. 26).⁶

Writing only two years after the publication of John Paul's letter, Dallen echoed the need for such inquiry, noting, "Few scholars have tried to relate the development of its liturgy and discipline to sociocultural factors in the Church and society or to concurrent developments in the experience and understanding of the Church community, redemption, baptism, eucharist, sin, grace, and so on" (Dallen 1986, p. 356). He goes on to ask, "how are we to theologize about penance without studying how believers have experienced and celebrated it?" (Dallen 1986, p. 357). This is a crucial question. As John Paul, Dallen, and Hellwig all observed, theologians must draw on the insights of social scientific study of the relationship of the sacrament of penance to the more fundamental human processes that it ritualizes. In neglecting to clarify basic assumptions about what it means to be human by means of critical cultural and psychological methods of inquiry, theological treatments of penance

⁴ Moreover, all of the texts cited above call for insights from other fields of study to clarify and critique open theological questions about the sacrament of penance, mainly by explicitly requesting aid from scholars in fields like psychology, sociology, and anthropology, but also in their own attempts to draw on insights from these fields.

⁵ Bernard Lonergan argues that theology is an ongoing, collaborative, and dynamic process that "mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix." See (Lonergan 2007).

⁶ Hellwig echoes this point, arguing that theologians "must understand the problem [of sacramental penance] from historical, psychological, and theological perspectives, with a sober but ruthlessly honest commitment to the Roman Catholic tradition" (Hellwig 1982, p. 1). See (Morrill 2014) for a candid and insightful comparison of Hellwig's book and John Paul II's encyclical.

are unable to connect theological explanations of the sacrament to the subjective experience of the Catholics who actually use—or refuse—it.

2.1. Vergote's Cultural Psychological Perspective on Religious Guilt

Because the kinds of guilt feelings involved in the history of private confession are enmeshed in individual thoughts, desires, aggressive impulses, and fears—what Sigmund Freud called the world of the unconscious—investigating these guilt feelings in context requires the adoption of a psychological perspective that does not methodologically foreclose religious or theological modes of inquiry, but that can illuminate how people in a given religious context appropriate theological discourse and practices for personal, often unconscious purposes. Describing such an approach, cultural psychologist Jacob Belzen points out:

Accepting that culture is a major shaping force in self-definition, conduct, and experience, requires a different kind of research than is usual in mainstream psychology of religion . . . it becomes necessary to study not the isolated individual, but also the beliefs, values and rules that are prevalent in a particular situation, together with the patterns of social relatedness and interaction that characterize that situation. (Belzen 2001, p. 48)

Antoine Vergote, a Belgian psychoanalyst and philosopher who taught psychology and educational science at the Catholic University of Leuven, embodies such attentiveness to the psychological dynamics of social relatedness. Vergote's interdisciplinary appreciation for the insights of cultural anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, and philosophy provides a helpful methodological approach that can “yield insight into the psychic processes that are involved in and determined by [a] culturally given religion” (Belzen 2001, p. 53).

Against making quick and casual judgments about the relationship between religion, rite, and emotion, Vergote writes that we can correctly interpret “religious attitudes and behaviors psychologically only when we understand them as a conflict-solving process” (Vergote 1993, p. 83). Such a process necessarily brings the subject's “desires, disillusionments, revolves, anxieties, identification with models, evolving experiences, and so on” in dialogue with the opportunities presented or prohibited by religious forms (Vergote 1993, p. 83). This dialogue constitutes how “the subjects produce their own religious representations and belief dispositions” (Vergote 1993, p. 83). Vergote supplements philosophy with a culturally informed psychology, avoiding reductionist ways of thinking about the relationship between religion, culture, and psychodynamic phenomena, showing how health and pathology can coexist in the same religious milieu.

Expanding on an idea popularly attributed to Freud—namely, that healthy persons should be able to work and to love—Vergote identifies four features of human living that are constitutive of mental health. First, the ability to work, or to meaningfully adapt to and transform one's surroundings for the benefit of oneself and others. Second, the ability to use language flexibly and creatively to present oneself to the world and others in it. Third, the ability to love, or to desire and pursue intersubjective union. And fourth, the ability to enjoy pleasure. These four criteria interpenetrate and affect one another, and the failure of one cannot help but impinge on the functioning of the others (Vergote 1988, pp. 16–21).

Given these criteria, psychic pathology can refer to any self-mutilating process that solves some emotional conflict by closing down possibilities for work, love, communication, and enjoyment. Though Vergote attributes these properly to individuals, he suggests that these criteria might be extended to the level of collective or cultural pathology. Any religious context that “diminishes its members' opportunity to realize their human potential and favors individual pathologies” can be described as pathological, if only in an analogical sense (Vergote 1988, p. 31). Indeed, we easily can envision cultural milieu, especially religious milieu, that win some imagined peace by dissuading their practitioners from seeking to transform the world, from concern for the other, from the labor of putting words to experience, or from accepting the pleasures of life. Thus, to return to the distinction between

unhealthy and healthy religious guilt, we might begin by saying that healthy guilt does not prevent those who experience it from fulfilling the four functions outlined above, while unhealthy guilt causes some impediment to one or more of these functions. But before moving on to examining the role of guilt in United States Catholic culture, it will be helpful to define it more clearly.

2.2. Vergote's Retrieval of Freudian Guilt

As scholar of religion and mental health Hermann Westerink convincingly argues, Sigmund Freud's entire corpus can be interpreted profitably as an attempt to trace guilt from its numerous clinical expressions, through the structure of the psyche, all the way to the origins of human consciousness (Westerink 2009a).⁷ The cost of living amongst others involves what Sigmund Freud termed a generalized sense of guilt, the feeling that "I" am being observed and measured by something "over me," such that I am caught between what I want and what I ought to do.⁸ Because this perception is not a continuous feeling, Freud argued that this generalized sense of guilt can remain largely unconscious, except for moments when it awakens into specific feelings like remorse or guilt-feelings. Freud's archaeological exploration thus interweaves two different deployments of the term guilt. One pertains to the psychic tension between drives and social morality as constitutive of the human ego. This is a psychoanalytic and explanatory term. The other, usually translated in Freud's writings as the "sense of guilt" or "guilt feelings," refers to the experience of suffering experienced by a majority of Freud's patients, an experience thought by Freud to result from the theorized and largely unconscious psychic structure of guilt. Thus, guilt feelings are the result how psychic consciousness structures itself between desirous instinct and moralistic expectation.

In a retrieval of Freud that both learned from and challenged psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's similar return, Vergote develops Freud's examination of guilt in light of the contributions of European phenomenological scholars like Martin Heidegger, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Beginning from the Freudian assumption that individual subjectivity is formed in a small social field constituted by multiple lines of force and appeal, Vergote argues that a subject's ongoing acceptance and rejection of these phenomena, together with the consequences of that subject's relationships (their acceptance or defense against the subject's decisions) create a psychic reality that already shapes the subject's future encounters (Vergote 1988, p. 23). For Vergote, the psychic dimensions of desire and debt are fundamental aspects of human subjectivity. By desire, he means, in my own loose terminology, the longing for satisfaction as it is structured and limited within language and culture. By debt, Vergote means the way that relational obligations shape how we understand what we should want and what we owe to others, constituting our dependence on the cultural and symbolic order for identity.⁹

Guilt is thus simultaneously culturally and psychologically constituted. As a psychological phenomenon, guilt signals the appraisal of one's subjective value according to some internalized way of evaluating the relationship of the self to some other or others.¹⁰ The dynamic negotiation of relational and libidinal forces creates what we can somewhat more usefully term the moral conscience, which describes the person in the midst of weighing, sometimes discursively and sometimes intuitively, the possibilities afforded within the context of desires and obligations. As Vergote notes, "The moral conscience does not exist in anyone from the beginning, but is created in the acceptance of the necessity

⁷ See also (Speziale-Bagliacca 2004). Speziale-Bagliacca writes, "Sigmund Freud never actually wrote a book dedicated entirely to guilt, but the various comments he made on the subject throughout his work make him the true initiator of the study of the sense of guilt and certainly the first person to approach the question systematically" (Speziale-Bagliacca 2004, p. 1).

⁸ In his own words, "the perception which the ego has of being watched over in this way, the assessment of the tension between its own strivings and the demands of the super-ego." See (Freud 1962, p. 83).

⁹ The influence of Jacques Lacan, under whom Vergote studied, is evident in his appeal to Lacan's distinction between the imaginary and symbolic orders as he makes his own interpretative return to Freud. For a discussion of Vergote's debt to Lacan, see (Westerink 2009b, pp. 213–45).

¹⁰ Contemporary appraisal theories of emotion confirm this. One classic clinical psychological treatment of guilt as an emotional appraisal is (Tangney and Dearing 2004). See also (Tracy and Robins 2006). For a more psychoanalytic approach, see (Lewis 1971).

of the prohibition of desire" (Vergote et al. 1998, p. 82).¹¹ Conscience, as the source of persons' valuing and devaluing of themselves in context of bodily and relational embeddedness, describes the power of subjects to position themselves with respect to symbolic value, an interpersonal and meaning-laden judgment, and not simply with respect to satisfaction, the achievement of some pursued pleasure.¹² Feelings of guilt, then, do not signify the suffering that comes from the failure to attain a wished-for pleasure but rather the failure to uphold our obligations. We are unsatisfied with respect to our own desires, but we are guilty with respect to our ties to the other.

Thus, as a cultural phenomenon, guilt becomes possible when our perceived obligations to others are internalized as an authoritative standard for personal appraisal. These obligations can take many forms, like "What my father wants of me," or "What I am not allowed to have," and whether or not they are accurate approximations of what actual other people expect has little bearing on their psychological force. Moral standards are acquired largely by unconscious imitation as adaptive responses to real problems and to perceived expectations, and their ongoing influence is subject to the test of interpersonal experience. Guilt feelings are evidence of the internalization, or the felt sense, of the authoritative relationships that have become constitutive aspects of personal identity. Because of this, the emergence of healthy or pathological guilt must depend, in large part, on how our moral authorities support and nurture our ability to work, communicate, love, and appreciate pleasure.

In his psychoanalytic exploration of the structure of guilt, Vergote provides examples of what he calls a "religious neurosis of culpability," or religious guilt neurosis, a pattern of irrational behavior in which a person expresses an unconsciously held obsession over her or his own guilt by means of the religious symbols, rituals and discourse available (Vergote 1988, p. 48). Unable to resolve or even speak directly about a mostly hidden conflict, someone suffering from religious guilt neurosis can only recognize the threatening power of internalized guilt in images and practices that resonate with this power. Religious neurotics obsess about the requirements of ritual purity, about their own unworthiness, or about the dangerous closeness of an all-powerful, all-knowing divine power. None of these religious signifiers can directly articulate a neurotic person's actual conflict; rather, they maintain it in a careful equilibrium with the rest of life as a partially successful problem-solving mechanism.¹³

2.3. Collective Guilt and Religious Neurosis

Vergote reasons from the existence of individual religious guilt neurosis to the possibility of a cultural situation that, while not directly causing neurosis in all its subjects, nevertheless disposes them to suffer the general effects of a repressive or unhealthy sense of guilt. He terms this milieu a "collective neurosis," borrowing from Freud's use of the phrase to describe religion in general.¹⁴ But while not all members of a collective neurosis become neurotic themselves, a repeated overemphasis on the significance of human sinfulness in the language and practice of a religious culture tends to inspire one of three possible responses: creative forms of subversion, total or partial withdrawal, or something of a capitulation to symptoms of obsessional neurosis.

Drawing our attention to a prime example of collective neurosis, Vergote reminds his readers of "the record of a religious education that holds sexuality in abeyance, represses all violence, and exalts

¹¹ As Vergote goes on to insist, "Prohibition and judgment of condemnation are not synonymous" (Vergote et al. 1998, p. 82). To prohibit desires is not necessarily to identify them as radically evil but rather to identify the impossibility of their attaining anything of value of themselves. It is to recognize the emptiness of doing what one wants without any doubt or clarification or demand for reasonableness in the midst of others.

¹² Cognitive psychologist Michael Lewis elaborates a developmental model that takes this distinction into account in (Lewis 2000). For a philosophical approach to the distinction between satisfaction and value, see (Lonergan 2007, pp. 31–32).

¹³ References to "scrupulosity" in traditional Catholic confessional theology share much in common with what Vergote describes as religious guilt neurosis.

¹⁴ Vergote employs the notion of "collective neurosis" in part to criticize Freud's interpretation of religion on the grounds that Freud elevated the pathological instances of religion, rather than its healthy manifestations, as his psychological paradigm for religious patients. While Freud gives a nod to the possibility of a healthy-minded religious outlook, he spends little time examining the conditions of healthy religion. See (Vergote et al. 1998, pp. 17–37). For a similar argument, see (Rizzuto 1979).

the idea of self-mastery,” with specific references to the dangers of and risks associated with sexuality (Vergote et al. 1998, p. 73). He traces the troublesome effects of pre-Vatican II Catholic moral theological discourse and practice on the individual psyches of Catholics, whether they were specifically neurotic or merely diminished in their capacity for love, work, communication, or enjoyment by “a form of Christianity whose message becomes concentrated on the consciousness of sin and whose larger aims are reduced to the constant struggle against sin” (Vergote et al. 1998, p. 73). For inhabitants of this milieu, failures to uphold the standards of absolute purity in the realm of the imagination, to say nothing of the realm of human action, incurred the psychological equivalent of heavy taxation.

Vergote substantiated Freud’s exploration of obsessive neurosis and confirmed the problematic status of the practice of private confession for individuals haunted by an aggravated sense of guilt. But Vergote disagreed that all who practice such rituals are necessarily neurotic. On the contrary, guilt belongs to human subjectivity itself: to be a human self is to be fundamentally and non-pathologically conflicted, torn between the push of desires and the pull of obligations. The question before us is whether the culture surrounding the practice of frequent confession was emblematic of a “healthy guilt,” such that revisiting the practice of frequent confession might promote a religious culture predicated on and generally supportive of the harmonious interplay of a society of relatively healthy individuals. An affirmative answer to this question might justify the narrative about the decline of confession found in John Paul II’s *Reconciliation and Penance*, while a negative answer will call into question the link between the decline and a corresponding loss of a healthy sense of sin.

Thus, in what follows, I want to evaluate the practice of frequent confession in 19th and early 20th century Catholicism in the United States by probing the relationship of its moral and cultural surroundings to just one of the four criteria outlined at the beginning of this section: namely, the ability of Catholics to express themselves creatively and authentically through the religious and moral discourse available to them through their participation in Catholic parish life. Within this milieu, Catholics made use of the various elements of their religio-cultural world, including a moral language centered on obedience and purity and the spiritual authority of an institutional priesthood, to renegotiate their place, their sense of agency, and their identity. By examining this culture in greater detail, we then will understand why it might have been helpful for ordinary Catholics to practice frequent confession. Furthermore, we will see also that the culture in which frequent confession became a popular practice severely inhibited the ability of Catholics to describe, accurately and honestly, their moral experiences in favor of a simplified moral discourse. Far from emerging as an effect of mid-20th century factors, unhealthy guilt was alive and well among Catholics before the cultural revolution of the 1960s.

3. The World of Catholic Guilt

The local parish was the heart of American Catholicism, the locus of the struggles of immigrant and American-born Catholics alike to forge an identity out the customs of their old country and the values of a predominantly northern European Protestantism. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, there were barely over a hundred Catholic parish churches in the United States (Dolan 2002, pp. 29–30). By 1860, churches full of Irish and German immigrants spread throughout New England, then south and west into Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee, with over three million Catholics making it the largest Christian denomination in the United States (Dolan 2002, p. 58). Despite their numbers, Catholics did not perceive themselves to be a particularly powerful social force. On the contrary, antebellum hostility for Catholic immigrants and their native counterparts spread throughout the country, prompting Roman Catholics to emphasize their differences and develop resources for maintaining their identity.¹⁵

¹⁵ In a recent publication, historian Patrick W. Carey provides an exhaustive examination of the process by which American Catholic clergy and theologians sought to defend and explain the practice of sacramental confession in light of wider Protestant polemic. See (Carey 2018).

The rhetoric of Catholic preaching and teaching during the late 19th century testifies to what scholar of religions Ann Taves describes as the “creation of an enclosed Catholic subculture” designed to defend itself “as a beleaguered minority banding together to protect itself from the attacks of its enemies” (Taves 1986, p. 128). The parish and the subculture that surrounded it was, for many Catholics, a haven in the midst of a resentment that was as much religious as it was political. But the parish also served as a base from which American Catholicism could begin a long process of negotiation with the wider public that viewed it with suspicion and contempt.¹⁶

Forming the weekly core of parish practice was the celebration of the Mass, whose primary agent was the parish priest. Intoned in Latin with only a modicum of active responses from the participating laity, the Mass as a complex whole signified for many Catholics the mystery of a God who saves people by providing them with a redemptive ritual and men to offer it on their behalf, a ritual that required little comprehension on their part for it to be effective. Belonging to the church of the priests and maintaining the sense of such belonging throughout the vicissitudes of daily life was the key to pleasing God and enjoying the eventual rewards of heaven. Numerous and diverse devotional practices inside and outside the parish grounds—processions, praying the Rosary, novenas, to name just a few—fostered an integration of faith into daily life and strengthened Catholics’ sense of identity (Taves 1986).

Communion, receiving from the priest the body and blood of Jesus under the appearance of bread and wine, was the fullest way of participating in the Mass. But for centuries reception of communion had been reserved in practice to the clergy, who were ritually obliged to receive, and to those in vowed religious life. The mystery and holiness ascribed to the sacrament coextended with a sense that only the worthiest might approach without fear. Most of the Catholic laity, encouraged to view themselves with suspicion and the reception of holy communion as reserved for the most pure, communed no more than once a year, an obligation laid down in 1215 by the Fourth Lateran Council. From a certain theological perspective, this arrangement was acceptable; according to the canons of the Council of Trent it was beneficial enough just to be in the presence of the sacrament with a living faith.¹⁷ Those who did receive communion were expected to go to confession beforehand. As Catholics learned from grade school onward, no one conscious of a mortal sin dared, on pains of Hell, to receive communion, and only through the absolving powers of the priest in the confessional could one be freed of mortal sin.

The emphasis on mortal sin here is significant. The principle purpose of sacramental confession, according to Tridentine theology, is to restore the justifying grace lost through mortal sin, without which the sinner is cut off from church and God. The Council of Trent had ratified a distinction between two kinds of sin, venial and mortal. The damage done through venial sins, minor failures that do not entail a complete turning away from God, could be repaired through any number of satisfactory acts on the part of the Christian (prayer, going to church, giving alms, fasting). In contrast, mortal sins, whose seriousness merits the loss of God’s indwelling grace given in baptism, required the mediation of the hierarchical ministry of the church. In other words, sacramental confession was the only means by which a Christian who had sinned mortally could be reunited to God.

Moreover, the Council of Trent insisted that sacramental confession is only valid if penitents confess *all* mortal sins of which they are conscious; this was termed “integral confession” (Coffey 2001, pp. 101–7).¹⁸ In practice, the theological complexity of the distinction between mortal and venial

¹⁶ Dolan describes the Catholic response as “a siege mentality” in the midst of “a nativist crusade” that “subjected Catholics to intense discrimination.” See (Dolan 2002, p. 64).

¹⁷ The Council of Trent distinguished three ways of receiving communion. Sinners (those without faith or those receiving in an unworthy state) received only “sacramental” communion, the consecrated host bereft of any positive spiritual effects. The lay faithful majority received “spiritual” communion by being in the presence of the sacrament with an attitude of faith and reverence. A third minority received it both spiritually and sacramentally. See (Council of Trent 1848, p. 81).

¹⁸ My explanation here is cursory and skips over several important caveats and distinctions. For a basic treatment of the distinction between mortal and venial sin in the context of penance, see (Coffey 2001, pp. 9–14). For a more extended historical elaboration, see (Mahoney 1987).

sin, however valid such a distinction might be in its own right, made it difficult for lay persons to be completely certain which sins were venial and which sins were mortal, resulting in a pressure to confess them all, just to be safe. All the foregoing did much to support a climate of moral suspicion and scrupulosity throughout Roman Catholic parish life in Europe and, by extension, in the United States. It was assumed that the Catholic laity had to work tremendously hard to avoid committing a mortal sin, and because inevitably they would, local clergy made recourse to the sacrament of confession readily available.

3.1. Preoccupation with Sin as Disobedience

The dominant moral theology of the Catholic world, in the United States and elsewhere, was centered on the avoidance of personal sin. As moral theologian John Mahoney argues, the moral theology that evolved alongside and in support of private confession was “heavily responsible for increasing men’s weakness and moral apprehension, with the strong sense of sin and guilt which it so thoroughly strove to inculcate or reinforce, and the humiliations and punishments with which it drove its message home” (Mahoney 1987, p. 28). Even while the number of Catholic going to confession was relatively low, the moral formation of the Catholic laity was an education in how to go to confession, just as the moral formation of the Catholic clergy centered on how to hear confessions.

In the emerging political arena of the European (and later, the American) nation-state, an understanding of sin in terms of law-breaking came to dominate Roman Catholic moral language (Mahoney 1987, p. 28). Drawing on the influence and meaningfulness of political institutions built on philosophical presuppositions about the necessity of law in the face of social chaos, a widespread understanding sin as law-breaking was embedded within compatible understandings of authority, power, and legal jurisdiction. Indeed, in a rejection of the medieval teleological tradition of moral reasoning that grounded reasons for acting in embodied human relationality, what counted as sin for Catholics in early modernity was determined not by the process of communal reasoning but by hearing the word of God and obeying.¹⁹

Sin language that appealed to the importance of law and order drew its rhetorical power from cultural and political upheaval, but embedded in this discourse are significant assumptions about the relationship of humans to one another and to God, assumptions that especially permeated the sacrament of confession. The embodiment of a moralistic and legalistic tradition in Catholic moral teaching and practice, above all in the formation of priests and the training of Catholics to go to confession, provided post-Tridentine Roman Catholicism with an understanding of the Christian life based almost entirely on notions of willpower, obedience, and clerical authority. Indeed, as Dolan argues, early American “enlightenment Catholicism,” a generally optimistic and rationalist moral theology, was quickly displaced by the influences of first a French and later an Irish style of Catholicism that, despite their liturgical and devotional differences, were united by a common skepticism about human freedom and an emphasis on fear as a means of inciting moral obedience (Dolan 2002, pp. 39–40).

Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor’s 2007 *A Secular Age*, a painstaking exploration of the relationship of religious identity to emerging forms of secularism, pays careful attention to the role of this kind of moral discourse in early modern Catholic culture (Taylor 2007). Taylor shows that despite maintaining a degree of separation from the Reformed and Puritan claims that Christians might achieve a positive assurance of their salvation, the pastoral ministries of the Roman Catholic church in North America and Europe tended nevertheless to emphasize certain clearly understandable

¹⁹ The reasons for the gradual erosion of teleological ethics in the face of deontology are complicated. Mahoney locates it in the influence of the Spanish Jesuit theologian Francisco Suarez, whose emphasis on God’s will as expressed specifically in the laws known through natural reasoning and divine revelation significantly shaped Catholic moral theology (Mahoney 1987, p. 226). An alternative, or perhaps complementary, explanation might be suggested by cultural historian Jean Delumeau’s *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture*, which traces through sermon, art, and religious practice of Europe a growing internalization of the fear of death (Delumeau 1990). Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre provides his own neo-Aristotelian interpretation of this shift in numerous places; in particular, see (MacIntyre 1984).

moral standards. These moral standards served not as “signs of election, but minimal conformity to the demands of God: the avoidance of mortal sin, or at least doing whatever is necessary to have these sins remitted” (Taylor 2007, p. 497). Sinning mortally placed one in a state of radical disobedience before God, such that one was assured of going to Hell were one to die before going to confession. Avoiding Hell as a penalty for mortal sin through obeying the moral law as communicated by the prescriptions of the church constituted the main vocation of Catholics, and it was an extraordinary layperson who sought a moral or spiritual world beyond minimal conformity to the church’s ecclesial and ethical injunctions.²⁰

3.2. Catholic Moral Reasoning

As I mentioned above, church law required penitents to make an “integral confession,” the precise identification of each mortal sin of which one was conscious, noting its category and the number of times it was committed. Catholics were taught from childhood that to omit a single mortal sin had the effect of rendering the entire confession invalid, and so church pedagogy trained Catholics to categorize their actions according to a binary system of “grave” or “mortal” sins, which must be confessed, and “venial” sins, which might be confessed but did not have to be. But viewed in light of experience, the objective gravity of certain sins deemed by the church to be mortal often was somewhat confusing. Sins like murder or adultery were one thing, but to include missing Mass on a Sunday or failing to uphold the Friday fast in the church’s list of mortal sins created for the laity a high degree of uncertainty around the distinction between mortal and venial sins. As Mahoney remarks, “in its attaching the element of sin so readily in the past to positive church laws on frequently trivial matters as a sanction to their observance, it has only helped to devalue the currency, and done little to engender and foster a healthy respect for real sin” (Mahoney 1987, p. 32). By emphasizing the danger of determining such complicated matters by oneself, confessional training encouraged Catholics simply to confess everything that might be sinful in the confident assurance that the priest’s absolution would cover it all: when in doubt, confess it.

Furthermore, the content of Catholic moral codes tended to focus predominantly on the dangers of the misuse of human sexual faculties. Though he offers some speculation as to the causes of this focus, absent as it was for the most part throughout the pre-Reformation middle ages, Taylor limits himself to the objective observation that in comparison to other kinds of desire, sexual desire became for modern Catholics a special province of mortal sin:

[Y]ou could go quite far in being unjust and hard-hearted in your dealings with subordinates and others, without incurring the automatic exclusion you incur by sexual license. Sexual deviation, and not listening to the church, seemed to be the major domains where automatic excluders lurked. Sexual purity, along with obedience, were therefore given extraordinary salience. (Taylor 2007, p. 498)

Taylor correctly identifies the explicitly sexual focus of the moral codes, made available to pastors through confessional manuals, which marked the Catholic moral theological discourses predominant in Europe and North America. Though we have very little data on the sexual lives of the Catholic laity themselves, evidence abounds for the clergy’s suspicion of sexual pleasure during this time. While priests and bishops recognized that marital sex was good insofar as it was the means by which humanity participated in God’s creation of new humans, the pleasure involved in procreation was viewed largely as a danger to the Christian moral life. Consecrated celibacy was recognized to be the purest state attainable in this life, and the closer that the laity could approximate this ideal, the

²⁰ Similarly, Mahoney observes, “As a consequence of this commitment to spiritual pathology, the discipline of moral theology was to relinquish almost all consideration of the good in man to other branches of theology, notably to what became known as spiritual theology” (Mahoney 1987, p. 27). This included all forms of pastoral care in parish contexts.

more holy they might become.²¹ Indeed, it was often advised that married people abstain from sexual relations before receiving holy communion for fear that the remnants of sexual desire might pollute the sacrament. According to these assumptions, surveillance and control of sexual desire offered to Catholics the central battle for their souls, and because each and every offense constituted grave sin, the sacrament of confession provided the only opportunity for purification.²²

As Taylor argues, the emphasis on sexuality likely contributed to the relative dearth of men in the confessional even during the period of frequent confession: the double presence of a celibate male authority and the necessity of speaking about “the most reserved and intimate facet of their lives” presented an almost insurmountable obstacle (Taylor 2007, p. 499). However, Catholic moral theology’s suspicion of sexuality was but the most visible symptom of a much deeper suspicion of human instinctuality itself. Not only sexual desire but also impulses born of aggression fell under moral suspicion and censorship. Hence, Taylor single out both sexual disorder and refusal to listen to ecclesial authority as constitutive of an automatic exclusion from communion with the church. Moral purity and obedience to the church were assumed to flow from the same condition of soul.

Here we might see a certain parallel between the moral reasoning that Catholics employed in the confessional and what Lonergan has identified as a decadent Scholasticism governing Roman Catholic theological thought (Lonergan 2007, p. 80). However theologically correct the conclusions of the manuals used in seminary education, the transmission of their content to the faithful through popular literature and preaching was not intended to convey a style of theological reasoning but in establishing the correct truths to be believed and the correct precepts to be followed.²³ Even if the prescriptions of the moral manuals were the relatively trustworthy results of careful moral theological casuistry, Catholic morality as taught ordinary Catholics presented these prescriptions as though they were handed down in their present intelligible form by God, such that any difficulties in following them reflected solely the recipients’ moral weakness. Hence, an attitude of obedience was deemed to be more trustworthy than a spirit of critical inquiry into the reasoning behind the church’s moral law.

3.3. Catholic Guilt

In summary, Catholic culture in the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries fostered a suspicious view of human aggression and desire on the one hand and a carefully structured, rational system of moral guidelines and positivist principles on the other. Such an emphasis on obedience to the positive moral law as promulgated by the teaching authority of the church effectively cultivated and maintained in the Catholic faithful a division between reason, specifically the reasoning power of the church as divinely inspired, and desire, specifically understood in terms of concupiscence. For the laity, the ease with which it was possible to violate the positive laws of the church was evidence enough of the dubious legitimacy of their own everyday desires on moral theological grounds, and the opacity of these laws themselves demonstrated the failure of reason that made the faithful dependent on an infallible church for guidance. Catholic subjects were thus caught in a double bind, taught to trust neither their own reason, nor their desires, but to confirm their wills in obedience to the benevolent authority of the church.

Looking at the historical data, we thus can confirm that the culture of Roman Catholicism in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—the world of frequent confession—indeed manifested what Vergote calls a collective guilt neurosis, a phenomenon so well known that it has

²¹ For historical analysis of this state of affairs, see (Tentler 2004, pp. 19–23). For instance, while priests preached and counseled from a generally positive view of marriage, they also encouraged married couples to abstain from sexual relations during significant periods of the church year, imitating those in clerical and religious life (Tentler 2004, p. 20).

²² For an extensive theological and historical discussion of Catholic theology and sexual ethics during this time period, see (Curran 2008).

²³ On this point, see (Jordan 2006).

its own name: “Catholic guilt.”²⁴ One of the primary symptoms of this culture was the inability of its participants to use its language in authentic and meaningful communication, particularly with reference to their desires and their obligations. The church as paternal authority provided conditions for purity based primarily on a suspicion of desire and an emphasis on obedience. By all accounts, the great majority of the Catholic faithful were not, in fact, neurotic. Though this culture’s preoccupation with legalism, moral purity, and individual effort surely fostered Catholics suffering from guilt neurosis, its more general effect was to cultivate a wider malaise with respect to the very possibility of achieving and maintaining a high degree of moral purity. This work was left largely to priests, to those in religious life, and perhaps to the religiously inclined and pious laypersons. Those who did strive for moral purity had to deal with the vicissitudes of perfectionism and moral rigorism; whatever theoretical and objective status they attained was bought at the cost of significant psychological conflict.

4. Ritualizing Catholic Guilt During the Rise of Frequent Communion

Catholics inherited the culture of Catholic guilt and collaborated in its maintenance for centuries, passing its language and obligations on to their children, without, however, feeling the need to confess their sins frequently to priests. However, in the late 19th century, Catholics in the United States began to confess their sins at an unprecedented rate, a trend that continued until the late 1960s.²⁵ What changed? In the final section of this article, I will argue that the emergence of frequent reception of communion among the laity reconfigured their relationship to private confession. As the reception of communion became a viable and meaningful religious practice for the laity, it initially fostered the accompanying practice of frequent confession within a culture of collective guilt, only eventually to supplant it.

4.1. The Rise of Frequent Communion

As I indicated above, before the 20th century the Catholic laity in the United States and throughout the world rarely received communion at Mass. And as long as the reception of communion was portrayed as something for a spiritual elite, the number of Catholics who made use of either sacrament, communion or the confession that was expected to precede it, remained relatively small. But in the early 20th century, Pope Pius X challenged this longstanding practice as part of a series of liturgical reforms, encouraging the laity to receive communion weekly, or even daily, so long as they were free from mortal sin.²⁶ In an effort to implement the papal decree, as Joseph Dougherty painstakingly demonstrates in his landmark 2010 study, a long and ultimately successful campaign of Catholic church leaders, associations, and educators in the mid-19th century established weekly communion as the norm for the laity in the United States (Dougherty 2010, pp. 111–37). Catholics began to receive the Eucharist at the weekly Sunday Mass in great numbers. What did not change was the assumption that the laity needed to go to confession before they received communion. When the practice of receiving communion was rare, so was the need to confess. Frequent communion, however, required frequent confession, and priests in the United States began to hear confessions at an unprecedented rate (O’Toole 2004, pp. 134–48).

The success of the campaign for frequent communion promised the Catholic faithful a ritualized means acceptance in the eyes of God and church, and Catholics flocked to the confessional in order to gain access to the body of Christ. As we saw above, the confessional box normally was not the site of radical conversion, nor did it seem to be a particularly egregious source of suffering for those who

²⁴ Indeed, Catholic guilt even has its own Wikipedia page (Catholic Guilt 2019).

²⁵ Carey provides a detailed overview of the increase in confessions during this time period. See (Carey 2018, pp. 165–98).

²⁶ The 1905 decree *Sacra Tridentina Synodus* spells out Pius X’s defense of frequent communion against a poisonous rigorism that, “under the pretext of showing due honor and reverence to the Eucharist, had infected the minds even of good men” (Sacred Congregation of the Council 1905). See (Dougherty 2010, pp. 81–110) for a careful analysis of this decree in the context of Pius X’s papacy.

made use of it. Rather, it was a necessary, and in hindsight temporary, hurdle, allowing Catholics to demonstrate the obedience that made them worthy to receive communion.

As we saw above, the moral reasoning made available to ordinary Catholics in the United States tended to emphasize the importance of doubt, not as a mitigating factor, but as an indicator that one really ought to confess. Thus, in the mind of the American Catholic, going to confession before going to communion was understood to be absolutely necessary, for to do otherwise was to commit the sin of presumption. In this way, then, a logic developed according to which not going to confession became itself a sign of sin, perhaps the sign of sin in one's life, a refusal to submit one's desires to the power of the church. Put more simply, ordinary Catholics went to confession when the cost of not going to confession became too high, and only secondarily because they were overly concerned with having committed this or that sin.

The new possibility of weekly communion raised the stakes, so to speak, for what it meant to belong to the church. So long as the Catholic laity were content only to fulfill their Easter duty, a phrase used to describe the canonical requirement that all Catholics confess and commune once a year, there was little pressure to confess and, by extension, to have something to confess. But with the normalization of frequent communion and the assumed purity required to receive it, a Catholic's willingness to go to confession became itself a kind of moral barometer for one's worthiness to approach the communion rail. To refuse to go to confession, even if one was not conscious of mortal sin, suggested the possibility of a disobedient attitude toward the church and thus toward God, an attitude that was ritualized in the act of remaining in the pew while others received holy communion.

4.2. *Good Enough Catholics*

Despite the climate of collective guilt that characterized this period, strong suspicions around sexual desire or aggressive behavior did not scare ordinary Catholics into a state of chastity and meekness but rather produced a state of heightened anxiety as the cost of belonging to the church. Catholics sinned, and sinned frequently. The confessional data we have from the time period reveals that the sins commonly confessed were banal, often sexual in nature, and habitual.²⁷ For most Catholics, frequent confession did not provide a setting conducive to true repentance, if by that we mean the cessation of specific sins. Rather, it provided the means to maintain a good-enough conscience before a God whose standards were impossibly high but whose benevolence allowed obedience to substitute for purity. The local clergy were positioned to recognize, with an authority subsidized by the laity, the obedience that constituted penitents as good-enough-Catholics—good enough, that is, to receive communion. A dialectic of frequent confession and frequent communion thus facilitated the ongoing maintenance of a felt sense of belonging in exchange for a taxation on pleasure and the willingness to confess one's guilt according to a reductive and legalistic moral framework.

Participation in this world meant accepting, to some extent, the church's fear of instinctual pleasures, at least in terms of the ability to frame moral language around it. The emergence of frequent confession required a sense of ritual literacy that allowed Catholics to quickly name easily identifiable sins, without ever learning how to decipher their latent content within a theological context. In terms of their overall religious health, the world of frequent confession presented a challenge to the ability of Catholics to express themselves authentically. It viewed with great suspicion the enjoyment of normal pleasures and cast doubt on the ability of the laity to flourish spiritually. The Catholic laity accepted these impediments to healthy religious practice in exchange for a sense of belonging, of identity, and for sacramental access to God.

²⁷ For a thorough presentation of this data, see (O'Toole 2004, pp. 131–86). Among many such examples, O'Toole cites one priest as complaining, "We could teach a parakeet or myna bird to say the words" of the many confessions he was accustomed to hearing (O'Toole 2004, p. 168).

Frequent confession became, for a time, a constitutive part of the world of Catholic guilt, and through confession Catholics upheld this world—but they also appear to have subverted it. By enacting the features of the moral landscape in which they found themselves frequently and in great numbers, the Catholic laity ritually performed both to themselves and the clergy the limitations of the practice of confession and its cultural context. The laity were willing to submit themselves to the discipline of the confessional, and they were willing to use the moral material at hand. Absent egregious transgression or a consistent program of self-inventory and reform, what was left to the laity to confess but hosts of minor behavioral issues that were somehow associated with not being quite good enough? Ritualizing this guilt, a sense of not being quite good enough, permitted Catholics to feel worthy enough to approach the communion rail.

4.3. *Frequent Confession for Unhealthy Guilt*

Was such an attitude a manifestation of a healthy sense of guilt? In the first part of this article, I argued that one of the psychological signs of unhealthy religious practice is the inability to communicate one's experience to others through the play of language available. As Vergote explains, "if a religious language fails to hold a possible meaning for others, or if it radically shatters the structure of language, or if it is no longer consonant with the reality envisioned, we may justifiably identify it as a pathological product of a religious consciousness" (Vergote 1988, p. 18). The foregoing analysis reveals that the juridical and legalistic moral culture surrounding frequent confession impeded the ability of Catholics to conceive of and translate their experiences into accurate and meaningful moral theological language. The moral language made available to the Catholic laity from the pulpit and parochial system was juridical and oversimplified, intended to identify express violations of the church's rules in order to adjudicate a layperson's status before God and church. Thus, as historian James O'Toole reports, "many parishioners complained increasingly that their confessions never touched on genuinely serious moral or spiritual matters. If, as the proverb maintained, the law was not concerned with trifles, confession often seemed to be concerned only with trifles, and the perfunctory nature of much of it was unsatisfying" (O'Toole 2004, p. 168). To return to John Paul II's own language, the culture of frequent confession promoted a sense of sin fixated with "the mere transgression of legal norms and precepts," a clear sign of unhealthy guilt by his own criteria (John Paul II 1984, no. 16). This state of affairs encouraged in ordinary Catholics a division between the world of the church, in which moral matters were a matter of what the church said was sinful and what was not, and the world of everyday life, in which decisions were messy, obligations complicated, and moral theology irrelevant.

The net effect of this division was to encourage the Catholic laity to articulate their sins as a violation of rules, rules whose justification lay in church's spiritual power over subjects identified by their obedience. Verbal confession within the culture of frequent confession served to express the penitent's disobedience before God and the Church. The content of the confession—the specific sins—was less important than the act of confessing itself. *That* the penitent confesses before the priest reestablished her or him as acceptable to God, and the priest's words of absolution provide the formal and effective acceptance of the penitent's confessing act. For ordinary penitents, the achievement of the sacrament of penance was in mustering the will to confess, to overcome the reluctance that spelled disobedience. Worse than any actual sin was the refusal to confess sin itself. This, then, is the infamous "Catholic guilt" at work: Catholics confessed because they were guilty, and they were guilty not because they sinned in this or that way but because their very constitution as desiring subjects demonstrated a resistance to law that the surrounding religious culture associated with sin. Absolution was not the removal of guilt, for this did not disappear. Absolution was the removal of the condition of having not confessed, that is, of disobedience.

Confession, then, answered the self-doubt created in the midst of unhealthy guilt with an ecclesially sanctioned assurance that depended only on the penitent's willingness to manifest obedience by confessing any sins of which he or she was aware and promising to avoid them in the future. A mostly unconscious internalization of God together with church and clerical authority, this sense of guilt

tied Catholics to the church in ways analogous to how fear of failing one's parents can tie children to the family's unspoken or spoken rules. God, for such Catholics, was mediated by and contacted solely through the clergy. The effect of the church's expectations, as perceived by the laity in a moral climate of suspicion and guilt, was to facilitate and maintain a constant anxiety in the face of confession and to promote an attitude of ambivalent obedience. This suggests that normal Catholics confessed their sins not because of the gravity of the sins themselves but because not to confess—to withhold confession—was implicitly to consent to a disobedience that marked them as disobedient, no longer good-enough Catholics.

For early American Catholics, the distinction between church and God was barely visible for the laity. God lay on the other side of the church, beyond the horizon of the church's liturgies, disciplines, feasts, and, for the laity, beyond the horizon of death and the time of purgatory that awaited the just-good-enough Catholic. Being recognized by the church was as close to being recognized by God as was fitting for Catholics pilgrimaging through this life's vale of tears. The crises of the postwar years and the rise of weekly communion together effected a gradual loosening of the close bonds between church and God, as well as a decline in the moral authority of the Catholic priesthood. The ability of the teaching authority of the church to speak persuasively and decisively for God was challenged by the American laity's access to other authoritative discourses. Backed by an affluence that permitted the free play of imagination with respect to the market within the context of a much more welcoming non-Catholic America, American Catholics were able to question the church's conditions for sacramental access to God. Not only was the necessity of the clergy to recognize, on God's behalf, the obedience of the penitent called into question, but the conditions for divine recognition themselves shifted from outward signs of obedience to God's will as revealed by the Church's positive laws to an inward and imagined condition of spontaneity and freedom unrestrained by external regulation.²⁸

The locus of the church's authority among the laity remains its liturgical power, for it is the church's liturgical rites that continue to confer meaningful identity on the Catholic faithful. But participation in these rites is seldom contingent on the orthodoxy of practical reasoning. Catholics do not go to confession, but nearly everyone present at the Sunday Mass receives communion. Where confession used to confer identity through the authority of the priest to recognize the penitent's recognition of their sins, now communion confers identity through an act of individual self-expression, a quintessentially private rite whose meanings are almost solely up to the communicant (Morrill 2011).

To be clear, none of the foregoing justifies the claim that the contemporary practice of private confession facilitates unhealthy guilt or that Catholics ought not practice it frequently. Rather, my more modest argument is that contemporary narratives about the decline of confession that depend upon a corresponding cultural decline in a healthy sense of sin are based upon an idealized and imaginary picture of early United States Catholicism. If contemporary Catholic clergy and theologians wish to promote the practice of private confession, they need to examine how the laity respond to church authority and how they tend to experience their faults. While the simplicity and availability of private confession once served a Catholic culture in which obedience was linked to a positive sense of self, most Catholics no longer experience their faults within the matrix of Church authority. For those few who do, private confession might make sense. But even for those who are attracted to private confession to a priest, its viability as a healthy religious practice depends on the wider cultural, ecclesial, and political context in which it is situated.

²⁸ On this point, see Catherine Bell's 1989 riposte to Victor Turner's criticism of the Vatican II liturgical reforms (Bell 1989). Taylor likewise charts the emergence of self-expression and authenticity as significant characteristics of contemporary religious life (Taylor 2007, pp. 473–504). Finally, see Hellwig's illustrative depiction of the conflict between the "catechism god" and the "other god" in the experience of Catholics after the Second Vatican Council (Hellwig 1982, p. 6).

5. Conclusions

Most rituals do not create emotions; rather, by ritualizing the obligations and desires that constitute their cultural landscape, ritual participants negotiate their way into a newly configured and empowering space. Ritual theorist Catherine Bell terms this aspect of ritual its “redemptive hegemony,” a “construal of reality as ordered in such a way as to allow the actor some advantageous way of acting” (Bell 1992, p. 82). Ritualization is more than demonstration or repetition. When people ritualize, they make use of the cultural and religious sources available to them, performing and reperforming roles within the networks of social relatedness in which they find themselves. By incorporating the moral theological language and the clerical dynamics that underpinned their culture, penitents used ritual confession as an opportunity to take action in their religious worlds, to move themselves around within it in order to attain a new sense of belonging and self-worth.

Throughout history, Christians have adapted a variety of penitential forms to their own culturally constituted needs. And yet under the influence of what is arguably the most authoritative teaching on penance in our time, John Paul II’s *Reconciliation and Penance*, the penitential vision of the Catholic hierarchy remains fixated on private confession. Faced with a dramatic decline in confessions that began in the late 1960s and showed no signs of stopping, John Paul II directed the Catholic Church to work toward the recovery of a sense of sin, something like the healthy guilt to which Pius XII had referred thirty years earlier.

Evidence that an attempt toward such a recovery was already underway can be seen in the Rite of Penance promulgated in 1973 in response to the Second Vatican Council’s mandate for reform. In contrast with the traditional language of venial and mortal sin that had previously dominated the moral theological language of American Catholicism, the reformed Rite of Penance bears witness to a more complex and multivalent notion of sin ([Rite of Penance, Decree of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship 1990](#)). Sin disrupts the friendship with God given to Christians in baptism, but addressing sin also requires reconciliation with those others whom sin inevitably harms ([Rite of Penance, Decree of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship 1990](#), no. 5). Furthermore, people sin not only individually but in cooperation with one another ([Rite of Penance, Decree of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship 1990](#), no. 5). Thus, according to the text, the reform of confession requires a correspondingly multifaceted set of rites that can facilitate healing and reconciliation on individual, relational, and communal levels.²⁹

But as we have seen, the moral and theological climate in the United States during the rise of frequent confession did little to encourage Catholics to cultivate such a multivalent sense of sin and a correspondingly healthy guilt. The evidence shows instead that the moral theological imaginations of Catholics well before the 1950s were taxed by the morbid and legalistic guilt that John Paul II had charged the postwar generations with producing. The Catholic Church may well need to recover a sense of sin, but given the overly reductive notion of sin that dominated popular American Catholic discourse described in the course of this article, Catholics must look elsewhere than the confessional culture of the past two centuries for a positive model of religious health.

The emergence of private confession as a popular practice was an anomaly that arose alongside the practice of frequent communion just long enough to acclimate the laity to its newfound sacramental access to God. The authority of the church as communicated through the ritual life of the parish, the discourse of parochial education, and the religious language of the family was reinforced by the importance of maintaining a sense of Catholic identity together with an emphasis on obedience as constitutive of this identity. Appeals to the dangers of hell and separation from God and all good things exaggerated the dangers of ambiguous identity, necessitating a ritual which could dependably

²⁹ As the Rite of Penance declares, “Just as the wound of sin is varied and multiple in the life of individuals and of the community, so too the healing which penance provides is varied” ([Rite of Penance, Decree of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship 1990](#), no. 7).

mitigate anxiety through the performance of obedience. Confessional practice provided the Catholic laity with a space in which to negotiate the demands made on them by the authority of the church with their desire for belonging and recognition: by dutifully recognizing themselves as having been disobedient, Catholics were recognized by the Church as good-enough for communion.

At face value, we might say simply that penitents gained freedom from sin, or relief from guilt, or the assurance of forgiveness. But these theological phrases acquire their lived significance and power from their proximity to actual relationships and felt obligations. By ritualizing Catholic guilt in the confessional, Catholics perpetuated the moral obligations that connected them to the community and its eucharist, and in confessing these obligations, found a sense of liberation, however limited and temporary. Indeed, perhaps the emerging practice of frequent communion itself, by providing Catholics with a means of ritualizing their worthiness, helped to dissipate the culture of Catholic guilt.

A tiny minority of adult Roman Catholics still make frequent use of private confession.³⁰ Like its earlier counterpart, contemporary private confession allows Catholics to situate and maintain their Catholic identities with respect to God through a filial religious obedience to the Roman Catholic Church. In the past, the church made use of strong connections between law, responsibility, and punishment in order to encourage sorrow for sins and the willingness to confess. Among self-identifying traditionalist Catholics, frequent private confession signals the possibility of revisiting a religious world that has otherwise all but disappeared, a “traditional Catholicism” reconstructed to deal with specifically modern problems. As such, this return is marked by ambivalence, cultural and ecclesial tension, and the perpetual threat of disillusionment. It is worth noting, however, that, like his predecessors, Pope Francis has repeatedly emphasized the importance of sacramental confession, going so far as to proclaim an extraordinary jubilee of mercy throughout 2016, a year dedicated to mercy, conversion, and consolation centered on the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation. Given the pontiff’s well-known impatience with traditionalism and false piety, it seems unclear how Pope Francis envisions that the ecclesial moral authority that undergirds frequent confession might be reestablished among the laity.³¹

For the most part, American Catholics are not overly concerned with their moral obligations to the Catholic Church.³² Priestly authority, once the locus of moral authority in Catholic parishes, has declined among the laity in favor of a widespread emphasis on individual conscience as the source of moral authenticity (D’Antonio et al. 2011, pp. 284–85). The Catholic guilt that once spurred Catholic to go to confession and, to a more limited extent, motivated ethical behavior, has given way to a much more ambiguous web of cultural and social obligations. Guilt exists where these obligations are strained, but it exists alongside a myriad of other senses of personal and communal fault like shame and alienation. This points to the continuing necessity in Catholic language and ritual of what Vergote calls the demythologization of morality: the recognition that the capacity for moral life develops gradually, in the midst of faultiness and guilt, into a precarious and ambiguous balance that must be consistently renewed and renegotiated in the midst of cultural influences and concrete personal interactions (Vergote et al. 1998, p. 71).

Indeed, as this article strives to demonstrate, psychoanalytic insights into the structure and function of guilt offer a promising resource for theological thinking about how the church ritualizes complex theological-psychological experiences like guilt, sin, and forgiveness. If consciousness of these phenomena involves a theological judgment about the human freedom involved in culturally

³⁰ According to research conducted in 2008 at Georgetown University by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), only a quarter of American Catholics report that they go to confession at least once a year (Gray and Perl 2008, p. 5). While there appear to be no reliable studies that examine the rate of Catholic confessions in other cultural contexts, nothing suggests that this trend is anything but consistent throughout the rest of the world.

³¹ The apostolic letter *Misericordia et misera*, disseminated at the end of the extraordinary jubilee year of mercy, provides a clear sample of Pope Francis’s support for the centrality of the sacrament of reconciliation (Francis 2016).

³² To cite a single straightforward example, according to the 2008 CARA study cited above, only twenty three percent of Catholics report attending Mass every Sunday, something required of every Catholic by Catholic church law (Gray and Perl 2008, p. 20).

and psychologically constituted experiences, psychoanalytic thinkers like Freud, Vergote, and Lacan might help to articulate how this freedom takes place and develops within, not somehow transcendent to, these experiences. Simplistic notions of guilt and sin denote simplistic understandings of the human condition. By contrast, a critical understanding of guilt as a complicated and multifaceted reality, attentive to issues of psychological development and cultural influence, challenge clerics and theologians to respect the moral and spiritual complexity of the children and adults who use, or reject, the church's rituals of penance.

If they are to be a source of healing, these rituals must provide a cathartic and self-reconciling context in which mercy and tolerance cooperate with law and restitution. Fault and the transgression of law are necessary aspects of a moral conscience, but they are insufficient. Rather, as Vergote argues, the ability to tolerate the ambiguity of pleasure and aggression and their relationship to our obligations to others is necessary to cultivating an ethical conscience. Conversely, a religious obsession with personal guilt, besides being a source of profound suffering, constitutes an impasse in the ethical becoming of the religious subject (Vergote et al. 1998, p. 74). Someone who cannot tolerate the ambivalences of aggression and desire will have difficulty encountering others as similarly ambivalent, ambiguous others deserving of respect. I can do no better here than to point us toward Freud's critique of the commandment to love one's neighbor in his *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud 1962, pp. 55–63). Whether and how the Catholic Church might incorporate these insights into its penitential rituals and practices is another question, but this much is clear. The ritualization of guilt promotes religious and psychological health only where it provides a sound basis for a renewed attempt to pursue the hard work of ethics: to balance the quest for personal authenticity with the obligation to others in the midst of work and love.

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