***Thinking inside the Box - Preparing for Confession***

Do you remember your first Confession? I know now that I was not very well prepared for my first Confession lo those many years ago. But I did exactly what all good Anglo Catholic kids did — I took out my trusted and appreciated “St. Augustine’s Prayer Book” by the Order of the Holy Cross. In it (the older editions), were incredibly long lists under each category of sin. It was helpful, and every now and then I look at one of my older books and I can see little pencil check marks. I wish I could tell you that I never have to “check” those sins anymore. The difference now is that I have had more practice at committing those sins!

When I review the lists, my mind goes back to those teen years and also to my context - since so many of those sins were done “in community” — that is, school, family, church, clubs, the baseball field, and delivering newspapers. Since then, I have been a part of more groups, and my responsibilities have shifted and changed, but there are — my sins — “thought,” “word,” and “deed.” My sins: “known” and “unknown”; “Things done and left undone.” “The burden of them is intolerable” as the General Confession says.

What I have learned over the years, however, is that as I look at the new lists that are “out there” some of the sins have been removed from the lists! If only I had known what was on the horizon, then I wouldn’t have had to Confess them, feel guilty about them, or do Penance for them! But upon further reflection and review, which means digging deeply into the Holy Scriptures, it would not appear that God has not changed His mind even if the culture has.

I love the Musical “West Side Story.” In one scene, a Social Worker has counseled the gang (the Jets) and helped them reach the conclusion that they have no responsibility for what they are doing. Now they must convince Officer Krupke. It’s their parents’ fault. They’re misunderstood. Then there is the line: “Juvenile delinquency is purely a social disease.” So, the conclusion in the culture is that we are not really responsible for our sin; it is simply a product of our environment. This ongoing theme caused Karl Menninger to write his extraordinary book, “Whatever became of Sin?” It is somewhat amazing to consider that a Psychiatrist had to ask the question. In some ways one can extract the principle of the culture “If I don’t feel guilty, then it must not be a sin.”

The result is that we can murder a person with words because this is how I FEEL, and we can gossip about them because then we can justify our feelings by having a wider support — but does it suddenly not become sin anymore? Is slander no longer a sin? Sadly, in the culture there are also personality types that need regular affirmation, and they become a party to the sin of others by simply accepting what they hear. Although I was trained in the Rogerian school of Counseling (non-directive, client centered) in sin, saying “uh huh” is not seen as affirming the person’s “right” to have feelings, it is assent to the sin. Sin simply must be rooted out and that’s why I must go back to my pencil marked “St. Augustine’s Prayer Book.” I am much better at sinning now than I was as that teenager. I have had more practice and my articulation of rationalization techniques is infinitely more sophisticated. But it’s all still sin, and the deeper the pattern of sin, the greater the need to repent, confess and do penance.

So, sitting in the box has taught me a great deal. I have heard the confessions of lay people whose sins have brought me to tears, as I focus on how painful their life is and how bravely they fight not to sin. Their confessions have taught me humility. While there are some sins, that are specifically related to being ordained, in the end the issue is the same: “All have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God.” Taking responsibility for our sins is a good step forward, since the world, in which we live, tries to convince us that we are not responsible. But the reality for us is this: on Judgment Day, those who would lead us astray in this world, will not be a part of our Judgment. However, according to Jesus, if WE have led a little one astray...yep.—.the millstone!