Confessions and Forgiveness: Beyond Catholicism

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Native American Literature Final

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Louise Erdrich's The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, follows the complicated story of Agnes DeWitt as she assumes the identity of priest Father Damien and lives out the rest of his life with the people of Little No Horse reservation. Bringing the structure of the Catholic faith with him, Father Damien arrives with the intention of conversion. During his time on the reservation and through his interactions with the complex characters living there, Father Damien questions the idea of blind faith and the rigidity of Catholicism. Erdrich reveals this transformation to the reader not only through Father Damien's interactions with the other characters but through the letters he pens to the Pope, seeking guidance and answers to his questions. As Father Damien's own understandings evolve, he becomes a connection between Catholicism and the Ojibwe beliefs, showing the ways in which these drastically different structures overlap. One way Erdrich places Father Damien in this role of connection is through the act of confession, an idea that takes on a major role throughout the novel. Through its connection to forgiveness and to Father Damien's changing beliefs, confession becomes an act that moves beyond just a Catholic understanding. The secrets held by so many characters in this novel seem like they should be divisive, but instead connect people deeply through both the acts of confession and of forgiveness.

Father Damien's presence at Little No Horse has a profound impact on people individually but also changes the community as a whole. One major way Father Damien impacts the community is through his hearing of confessions. Father Damien felt a profound connection to the action of "chewing over people's stories, and then with a flourish absolving and erasing

their wrongs, sending sinners out of the church clean and new," (Erdrich, 5). This connection was not one-sided, as "there were those…who waited to unlock their secrets until they witnessed him [Father Damien] personally entering the box," (Erdrich, 5). In order to understand why this relationship is so important, it is crucial to understand the act of Catholic confession outside of this context.

At its most basic level, confession is "the act of stating one's sin to another person who is sanctioned to "hear" and to supply the reassurance of pardon and forgiveness" (Todd, 41). But confession as a concept is not this simple, "scriptures offer expanded meaning of confession. In I John 1:8, 9 RSV, confession is seen as a necessary condition for receiving the forgiveness of God," (Todd, 42). Confession is not simply telling someone a secret or a sin, but instead it carries the immense weight of guilt the confessor has and the desperate need for forgiveness in god's eyes. In The Drama of Catholic Confession, Boyd Barrett pushes the importance of this act further by commenting on the dramatic nature of the performance of confession and the weight this guilt of sin has on an individual. In this piece, Barrett comments not only on the intensity of confession, but on the immense amounts of fear and guilt surrounding it. He reveals the idea that in the mind of "every Catholic" lies the fear that "unless he confesses his sins he cannot be saved," (Barrett, 188). While this pressure would make it seem that confession would be an act everyone would take part in easily in order to be saved, Barrett comments on the complications of the action, revealing that "fear and shame make him shrink from confession. He finds himself in a wretched and tragic situation. If he does not confess he remains in guilt and danger. If he does confess -the torture of revealing his sin," (Barrett, 190). The reality becomes clear that in order to be saved, one most reveal the very things that fill the person with guilt and shame. This is not something that can always be undertaken lightly, and often is broken down into stages; the

first is the "acknowledgment of his grief or hatred of the committed sin," the second being the act of confession to the priest, and the third being "the element of satisfaction," or the moment where one feels the relief of being heard and being absolved of the action, (Worthen, 277). Understanding the amount of fear and difficulty that comes along with the act of confession, the gift that Father Damien has in this regard becomes apparent. Erdrich reveals that people seek out Father Damien and often will wait until he is available to hear their sins, demonstrating that there is something special in the way that he listens and the way that he forgives. While the person confessing is important to the relationship, "the person who hears the confession is crucial," (Todd, 45).

While the content of the confessions themselves is crucial to the story and the development of the characters, the connection that forms during confession is equally important. Following a particularly intense confession, Father Damien writes to the pope seeking guidance on "the bond sin creates between the absolver and the confessing sinner," (Erdrich, 275). It is already clear that Father Damien created a profound bond with the community as a whole through the way he hears and forgives. At one point in the novel after a long night and a visitation from what he fears is the devil, Father Damien still hears confessions the next day. He understands the people's need for his forgiveness, and despite his own suffering and the impact of having to bear the weight of others' sins, he still listened despite the fact that through their words he "became such a seething repository of voluptuous nightmares that he found it impossible to accomplish his duties," (Erdrich, 192). Even as Father Damien got older and it became harder to perform his duties, he still kept his confessional hours understanding that "he was in demand," because the "quality of his forgiveness really made people feel better- his human sympathy, or his divinely chosen penances" (Erdrich, 299). Even though there was a

younger priest available, people preferred to see Father Damien, and he understood this connection and felt the same responsibility to help "his people." It is clear that the people of Little No Horse as a whole understand there is something special in the way Father Damien views other people and the way he forgives, but Erdrich takes this further allowing the reader to view specific individual moments where Father Damien is able to hear the suffering of someone else, to hear their sins and darkness, and to forgive with a patience and compassion that isn't an assumed part of the intense drama of Catholic confession that Barrett describes as an act filled with fear.

The way that Father Damien handles the shame that comes with the confession of sins is explored in the novel when he sits patiently as a man struggles to reveal his sins. Rather than growing impatient and eager to reach the goal of absolution, Damien understands that it was "very possible that this sinner had borne his guild for years, until it ate away at his resolve," (Erdrich, 299). Damien goes further in his compassion, revealing that often times "their sins weren't usually even terrible- just the worst in their own minds." He coaxes words out of the man by saying calmly to "Go ahead," and that "you will be forgiven," (Erdrich, 299). The patience and level of profound understanding that Damien shows in this encounter begins to explain why there is such a need for his type of absolution in the community at Little No Horse. This is again seen in his interactions with Mary Kashpaw, the young daughter of Quill. Mary Kasphaw becomes one of the most important connections that Father Damien forms at Little No Horse, as he becomes close to her after taking her away after the loss of her mother and her suffering at the hands of Napoleon. His understanding of her life and of her pain again reveals his immense ability for compassion and the ways in which he moves beyond the rigidity of expected Catholic confession, instead responding to the needs and reality of the individual

seeking forgiveness. When Mary Kasphpaw confesses twice a week in the silent form of "a tap on the screen and a whisper like the sigh of windblown glass," Father Damien rarely gave her "more than one Hail Mary…How could he assign more? She committed no sins," (Erdrich, 119). The gentleness with which he responds to her and the limited penance he gives her even as she confesses, demonstrate the ways in which as he spends time at Little No Horse, Father Damien's implementation of Catholic practices becomes more fluid and less doctrinal.

Father Damien's changes in belief aren't just revealed through his interactions in confession with other characters, but also through the letters he writes to the pope. These letters contain not only Father Damien's secrets, but also his versions of the confessions he hears, revealed in writing in a desperate effort to find understanding and guidance from someone else. It is clear that he does not take the revealing of confessions, but his own and others, lightly, as he writes in one letter that he hopes "in these instances, that my revelation of confessed sins has been warranted by the serious nature of my quest," (Erdrich, 4). Throughout the letters, Damien not only seeks out advice on how to handle various interactions on the reservation, but he also seeks out absolution for himself, having only the pope to turn to for forgiveness. Despite his discomfort in revealing the secrets and sins that were confided in him, Damien believes that "to address the Pope was…next door to confiding in God," (Erdrich, 5) and the only way for him to have someone relieve some of the weight he carries. His desperation for absolution is evident in the letters as he hopes that "if only he, too, could be washed to perfect goodness, forgiven" (Erdrich, 6). In his earlier letters, written in a time of a stricter adherence to a Catholic mindset, Damien is seeking someone to absolve him of his sins the way he does for others, yet the only way he can do so is write letters that remain unanswered. This one-sided conversation leaves Damien without the bond between the "absolver and the confessing sinner" that he is able to

provide so many others. This desperation to be forgiven is understandable, as Damien's secret identity of being Agnes DeWitt is one that he holds close throughout the novel and lives in fear of accidentally revealing.

Father Damien's identity is a secret that is revealed to the reader in the very beginning of the novel. This feels like a secret that would not be revealed until the very end, something that would shock the reader who has grown to know Father Damien as the priest, and yet Erdrich doesn't keep it hidden. The amount that this secret weighs on him is clear through his letters, writing at one point that he addresses the pope "as a sinner and also as an imposter, hoping for an absolution," (Erdrich, 6). And yet this secret is one that the reader, and it turns out most of the other crucial characters in the book, know without Father Damien even needing to formally confess. Erdrich brings the reader into the bond created through secrets and confessions by giving access to such a profoundly important piece of information so early on in the book, before the reader can even understand how important the information is. Having this information and knowing the lengths Father Damien goes to in order to hide it, puts the reader in a position of guarding the secret the same way he has to. As Father Damien interacts with other characters, the knowledge of his identity of Agnes DeWitt is one that both he and the reader hold close. With the amount of seriousness the Catholic structure puts on the guilt and shame that comes with secrets and sins and the necessity of confession to relieve this, Erdrich creates a combination of Catholic structure and the more fluid Ojibwe beliefs in the way she uses Father Damien's secret. Damien confesses his identity in his letters to the pope, but in his interactions with other characters, they reveal their knowledge of his secret to him and provide the sense of forgiveness and understanding he is so desperate for, without him needing to confess the way he has been taught to believe.

In some of the interactions regarding Damien's identity, there aren't even words and confessions needed. When Father Damien realizes that Fleur knows his secret, there is no moment of explanation or revelation needed, he simply understands that "she had a fierce intelligence…and accepted that she'd known his secret from the beginning, and it hadn't mattered," (Erdrich, 263). This moment of complete acceptance and disinterests flips the expected reaction for both the reader and of Father Damien. This moment is similar to the reveal of Mary Kashpaw knowing his secret, as it is simply understood that she has known and guarded his secret the whole time. In both of these instances, Damien doesn't need to confess nor ask for forgiveness as his secret wasn't even viewed as a sin. There are two more characters who reveal their knowledge of Damien's secret, both doing so in entirely different ways. The first is Nanapush, a character that insights many conversations and questions with Damien about his own faith. As the two of them sit together playing chess, Nanapush asks simply, "What are you," to which Damien responds "A priest," (Erdrich, 230). This encounter doesn't end here, as Nanapush asks "A man priest or a woman priest?" This simple statement is one that catches Father Damien completely off guard. When all Damien can do is repeat "I am a priest," Nanapush asks again "why then are you pretending to be a man priest?" In his questions, Nanapush holds no aggression, no hostility, he is simply asking a question, and yet it is the very question that Damien dreads anyone asking. As Nanapush continues to play chess, Damien realizes that this moment "so shattering to her, wasn't of like importance to Nanapush," and that instead Nanapush had asked the questions then to distract him in their game of chess. In this moment, it is clear that Nanapush also knew the secret for a long time and simply hadn't cared, similar to the way Mary and Fleur had, but instead used the knowledge of Father Damien's guilt as a strategy to win a chess game. In a final line from Nanapush in this encounter, he states that

while Damien has been tricking everybody he understands that "it is what your spirits instructed you to do, so you must to id. Your spirits must be powerful to require such a sacrifice," (Erdrich, 232). In these words, Nanapush has provided Damien with a sense of absolution, understanding, and forgiveness that he thought he could only receive from the pope.

There is one reaction to Father Damien's secret that again twists the ideas of confession and forgiveness, in the form of Pauline Puyat. Pauline's character, also known as Sister Leopolda, is one that spends most of the novel complicated the ideas of Catholicism and of confession. Father Damien works with Father Jude Miller to decide investigate the sainthood of Sister Leopolda. Through their work, many of the horrible acts she committed in the name of Catholic devotion are revealed, typically through Father Damien slowly revealing what she told him in confession. In her confessions to Father Damien it becomes clear that she finds pleasure in the punishments she receives in order to be absolved, but also in the burden of her words on Father Damien. She would confess in vivid and graphic detail, to the point that Damien would beg her to stop and absolve her instantly. Pauline desired the penance for her sins more than the confession itself, distorting the purpose of confession in cleansing the sinner. In her confession of the murder of Napoleon Morrissey, Pauline again distorts the structure of confession. Following her shocking words, Damien asks "Do you sincerely repent of what you did," to which instead of responding seeking absolution, she laughs. She then response in a hiss, "I wish to be absolved, and you will take my sin away! I know what you are. And if you banish me or write to the bishop, Sister Damien, I will write him too," (Erdrich, 273). These words cut through Father Damien as the weight of her implications hit. After letting the shock of his secret being revealed and used against him pass, Damien responds calmly, "If you do not believe I was ordained and sealed as a priest…Why have you come to ask me for a priest's absolution? What

good would it do your soul to obtain the empty blessing of an imposter," (Erdrich, 274). Here, Damien uses the bond that the two have formed, the bond between the confessor and the absolver, and thrown it back at her. Despite her knowledge of his secret and her desire to use it against him, Pauline still turned to Father Damien for absolution, for forgiveness, just as so many others in the community had.

These encounters between various characters and the revelation of Damien's secret, including the reaction of Pauline Puyat, represent the complicated relationship between confessions, secrets, and forgiveness. In his encounters with Nanapush, Mary, and Fleur, Damien did not need to speak his sin or ask to be absolved, he simply was. Here the difference between the Catholic understanding and expectations of carrying sin are put in contrast with the compassionate nature of understanding found in the Ojibwe beliefs. Even in Pauline's reaction, which takes place under the realm of a structured Catholic confession, the desire to be forgiven transcends the rules of Catholicism, as she turns to Father Damien despite her knowledge that he is an imposter. In this way, it becomes clear that forgives and confession are interwoven ideas that expand beyond the scope of strictly catholic confession and that "confession and forgiveness, then, are twin elements of a process frequently encountered in basic human relationships" (Todd, 39). In these moments, the secret that Father Damien feels he must confess to the pope, that he so desperately hides and seeks absolution for, is regarded as unimportant in comparison to the quality of Father Damien as a human being. Even Pauline Puyat, who uses confession as a means of punishment, cannot escape the desire to be forgiven and cannot ignore the immense quality of Father Damien's compassion that so many others feel.

Erdrich does not use secrets and their revelations the way one would expect in this novel. A stolen identity and a murder mystery are revealed in the first chapter and become almost

unimportant as the various characters and plots develop. In giving the reader this information, Erdrich creates a bond between the secrets, the characters, and the reader to the point that the reader is as much a part of the hearing of confessions as Father Damien. And yet the way in which Erdrich reveals secrets, both to the reader and the other characters, and the way she shows Damien's evolution and changing belief system, she relieves the ideas of guilt and shame that come so wrapped up in the concept of confession. Father Damien's identity as Agnes DeWitt is not a huge and shocking moment in the novel, but is instead a quick line at the end of a chapter, a line that is almost easy to miss. It is simply a fact that is added to the story, setting up the reader to react to this knowledge in the ways that Fleur, Nanapush, and Mary Kashpaw do. As Father Damien learns of a new way to approach the world and to question the blind faith he arrives with, Erdrich brings the reader along this journey, hopefully leaving anyone who interacts with the characters with the same ability to question and to evolve that Father Damien has. The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, brings the rigidity of Catholicism into question without attacking it. There is a sense of compassion and desire to learn that is placed upon two different belief systems as they come together at Little No Horse reservation. As worlds and characters interact in this novel, the ideas of conversion and of difference fades away as Father Damien finds the combination of two beliefs and the ways that forgiveness spans both.