Betting on the truth: Pete Rose's staged confession

by L. Gregory Jones in the February 10, 2004 issue

What gives a human being the capacity to attend to the truth, and to grow in that capacity?" My friend's question hung in the air, dangling over the center of the table as those of us in the room found ourselves strangely silent.

The question was left dangling for us because we knew that its presupposition is haunting. Many of us don't know how to attend to the truth, and too often we lack the capacity even to recognize the truth. Or, put more starkly, the question's haunting presupposition is that we live in a world of lies.

I eventually began to think of responses, drawing on my own research and passions. It is God's grace, and the shaping of a faithful life through holy friendships, that stir in us that capacity to attend to the truth and enable it to grow. Learning to tell the truth involves spiritual disciplines and practices, including habits of forgiveness and friendship that can help us overcome self-deception. But such habits involve commitments that are more difficult to sustain than we would like.

The difficulty of developing the capacity for truthfulness was a topic on my mind as I talked with a reporter about Pete Rose's recent acknowledgment that he had bet on baseball. The reporter had called to ask me what I thought of Rose's "confession"—was he truthful? On what grounds would I evaluate his truthfulness, his remorse, his repentance?

I told the reporter that I was skeptical about the authenticity of Rose's "confession." From what I have been able to discern (not having had the chance to read his new book), Rose has done little more than offered technically truthful statements without displaying remorse, a commitment to repentance, or awareness of the deeper implications of his statements. In my judgment, Rose lacks the capacity to be able to attend to the truth in anything more than a technically accurate way.

Of course, there are even doubts about how technically accurate his acknowledgment has been. Most notably, though Rose claims in recent statements that he never bet on baseball from the clubhouse or his manager's office, at least two of Rose's gambling "runners" contend that he regularly did so. Such difficulties reinforce my doubts about Rose's capacity, but they are not the primary reasons for my judgment.

Rather, there are at least three reasons why I think Rose lacks the capacity to attend to the truth, reasons that also illumine why it is important—and difficult—for any of us to cultivate such capacity. First, Rose only confessed when it became clearly in his self-interest to do so. He had been presented with strong evidence more than a decade earlier, but he had a remarkable capacity for self-deception and denial until his own self-interest compelled him to acknowledge what the evidence had already made clear. At stake for Rose was nothing less than his eligibility for the Baseball Hall of Fame (and time was ticking on his eligibility, which expires in the regular voting pattern in 2005), his ability to hold a job in baseball, and the importance of selling copies of his autobiography.

The true test of a person's capacity to attend to the truth, however, is whether one is willing and able to do so regardless of the cost to oneself. Rose has shown no such willingness or ability.

Second, Rose seems unwilling and unable to accept even collateral costs to his self-interested confession. He has indicated that he does not intend to undertake any follow-up steps to his confession in the way of repentance. Indeed, he has denied that he has any problem to deal with, despite longstanding habits of gambling that suggest addiction. He has said that people have been saying, "If Rose would just come clean, all would be forgiven." In Rose's view, he has come clean, so now it is up to the rest of us to offer full forgiveness.

Unfortunately, Rose fails to recognize the close conceptual and practical links between confession, forgiveness and repentance. Forgiveness is not a once-for-all judgment simply to absolve the past. Rather, it involves a redeeming of the past for the sake of new and renewed life in the future. Rose's lack of interest, or willingness to engage, in any future repentance reveals that he hopes for cheap forgiveness. But cheap forgiveness is not forgiveness at all.

Third, and perhaps most troublesome, Rose seems to lack an interior life sufficient to sustain remorse and regret. It is not simply that Rose has shown no remorse; rather, it is that he even lacks the capacity to do so.

Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised by all of this. After all, Rose’s staged “confession” is a public relations event that follows in an increasingly long line of celebrities’ “spin sorrow”—acknowledgments of wrongdoing, staged to end criticism and prepare the way for a rehabilitated career. One thinks, for example, of Tonya Harding, Bill Clinton and Marv Albert.

Even if we are not surprised, we ought to be troubled by the cumulative effects of these distorted and distorting confessions. Unless we can return, within the church and in the wider culture, to richer and deeper notions of what gives a person the capacity to attend to the truth, and to grow in that capacity, we will be captive to a cult of personality and the spinning sorrow that masks rather than illumines what we most need to see.