

Sorry condition: Genuine repentance and real apology

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To make a real apology has always been hard. Our forebears in the garden, when confronted with their wrongdoing, passed the blame to others. Adam had the gumption to blame God as well as “the woman whom you gave to be with me.” Eve blamed the serpent.

Celebrities of late have been imitating our biblical ancestors. Comic Michael Richards responded to being caught on tape delivering a racist tirade by apologizing profusely and seeking therapy. But he insisted to David Letterman: “I’m not racist—that’s what’s so insane about this.” Some months ago Mel Gibson offered up an anti-Semitic rant, and then said: “Please know from my heart that I am not an anti-Semite.” Evangelical leader Ted Haggard also found a way to say it wasn’t the *real* him who was meeting with a male prostitute and snorting meth: “There’s a part of my life that is so repulsive and dark.”

For Richards it was anger at being heckled that set him off; for Gibson the culprit was alcohol; for Haggard it was the dark side. They wanted to say that only part of them sinned—the bad part—and that they remained fundamentally good. Therefore they didn’t really need to confess their sins, but only to call in a publicist to control the damage.

Seeing another’s sins displayed on the worldwide media, one can only be glad that one’s own sins are not so public. The privacy of the pre-Vatican II confessional booth looks enormously appealing by contrast.

The media frenzies that surround celebrity (non)apologies remind us how much the world needs the church to display what genuine confession, repentance, and amendment of life look like. These practices presume not universal innocence, so that we are shocked at another’s racism or bigotry or hypocrisy, but rather universal fallenness, in line with our biblical forebears.

But fallenness is not the last word. Symeon the New Theologian, an abbot in Constantinople in the 11th century and a theologian still beloved among the Orthodox, imagines that the effects of the fall might have been averted—by

confession. "Because both of them absolutely would not repent and fall down before their Master to ask his forgiveness, he removes them and throws them out." Adam and Eve could have averted punishment if they had accepted blame and asked for mercy. A real apology, without blame shifting, could have changed the course of history. It still can.