

Shamelessness and Divine Mercy



When I was a seminarian some years ago, the life of pop star Britney Spears was spiraling out of control. Spears, a former Mouseketeer, who was raised in a Christian home in the Bible Belt, grew up singing in her church choir and was becoming mentally unglued under the glare of the public spotlight. After leaving a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center only one day into her treatment, she proceeded to cut off all her hair. It was front page news. At that point, I recall a priest/professor saying that he thought that Britney's unseemly behavior and bizarre response to so much public adulation was actually a good sign. According to the priest, Britney knew that she was being objectified by men as a goddess, but she also naturally knew in her heart that she wasn't one. She also knew that she was making some destructive moral choices. By acting out in this way, she was letting the world know that she was aware of her sinfulness. That was the good sign the priest was referring to. The next logical steps for anyone in her position would be repentance and a change in lifestyle – but as we know, these steps are not always taken.

The unraveling of Britney Spears was a modern day example of the “Dimmesdale Syndrome.” Arthur Dimmesdale is one of the main characters in Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic American novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. Dimmesdale, a 17th century Puritan minister in Boston, impregnates a married young woman named Hester Prynne. As a result, Prynne is publically treated as an adulterer. She has to wear a bright red “A” on her chest in public, and the minister, in a sense, gets away with it. However, he can't escape his conscience. Burdened with guilt, Dimmesdale twice imitates Hester by ripping his shirt open in public to reveal a nonexistent “A” on his chest. It is as if he was trying to expunge the guilt from his soul. Dimmesdale eventually dies a tormented man.

There is a lesson to be learned here: the soul can only stand so much unconfessed guilt. We need the cathartic release which comes from having our sins forgiven. If we don't seek forgiveness from serious sin, several things happen: (1) We begin to psychologically unravel; (2) We begin to create an alternative moral reality. We become very libertarian regarding the moral law, but we become very puritanical regarding debatable political and social causes. In other words, we try to prove to ourselves and to others that we are still morally upright by adopting lesser moral crusades. (3) We project our guilt onto someone else without acknowledging our own wrongdoing. This could result in something as serious as making a false accusation against another person. Archbishop Fulton Sheen once remarked if you ever want to know which of the seven deadly sins someone struggles with, all you have to do is listen to them complain about other people. (4) When we don't acknowledge our guilt, we eventually become shameless. An example of this could be a woman who wears a t-shirt that says “I'm Proud of my Abortion.”

The final thing that can happen when we don't acknowledge our guilt and confess our sins is that we start to justify our immoral behaviors. There is a moral maxim that *“a person either conforms his life to the moral law or he eventually tries to conform the moral law to his life.”* When people start doing this, barring a miracle, they are finished. In a very real sense, they are turning their backs on what God has revealed as morally wrong. Since they don't acknowledge their behavior as wrong to begin with, they do not seek forgiveness from God.

What is the solution to so much guilt and sin? For a Catholic, it is sacramental Confession. Today is Divine Mercy Sunday. In a series of revelations during the 1930's given to a young Polish nun, Saint Faustina Kowalska, Jesus revealed His Merciful Heart. Nobody who comes to Jesus with a repentant heart will be refused His mercy. Jesus wants the love and mercy which flows from His Most Sacred Heart to flow into our wounded hearts. He wants to transform our lives. He wants to unburden us of the guilt and shame we may feel deep down. All we have to do is to seek His forgiveness.

And what's the alternative? Wallowing longer in our sins? Becoming more unglued with each passing day, like a young Britney Spears? Resisting the urge every day to confess our guilt to our family and friends, publically, like Dimmesdale? None of those are wise alternatives. The best alternative is to seek the Divine Mercy which flows from the very Heart of Jesus.