



Pastor's Pen



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- Fr. Tom Wilson, Pastor

SORRY OR NOT

An ad campaign for one of the best snack foods ever, the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, has as its tag line, "Not Sorry." As a sponsor for college basketball, I see the promotion frequently. I'm not clever, but the tag line must be. I'm uncomfortable with the words literally, but I understand the concept's play on words. Sorry is important in the life of a Christian and, I hope, every human being. Sorry starts the repair process in relationships, prevents spiritual and emotional diseases from festering, and clears the way for a deeper relationship with God. Being sorry is important. Receiving sorry and forgiving is just as important.

Despite the importance of sorry for our souls, relationships, and psyches, it is difficult. Original sin, with its foundation of pride, makes us drift toward "not sorry" as a typical course of action. We need to learn to *say we're sorry*, and we need to *be sorry* for it to be the cleansing elixir we need. We all know that sorry is hard. We may be given permission to not be sorry by a culture that is hard-wired to defend even the most egregious actions. On the flip side, we may not quickly accept sorry, because we are conditioned to carry grudges or mistakenly believe we weaken our position by accepting forgiveness.

Since the March for Life in January, I have followed off and on the story of the high school students from Kentucky, who were skewered on social media when a brief video circulated suggesting they were mocking a Native American man. An accessory they were wearing was considered by social media messengers as evidence they were kids who adhered to hateful messages. The image and the message went viral with the help of major media outlets on TV and at least one major newspaper. People who should have known better, including the bishop from the diocese the students came from, jumped on the bandwagon attacking the character of the students.

There was just one problem. The brief video was severely clipped and did not show the whole story. It took just a few days for the real story to come out that the incident was provoked by a third party, and the students didn't do anything wrong. This was confirmed by independent examiners of the incident. The character of the students was attacked, and those attacks will be available essentially forever through the internet.

Some involved in spreading the falsehoods have said they were sorry. Many have not. The social media culture tends to spread data and then go silent when proven wrong and rarely issues a discernible apology. The mindset escapes me, but there appears to be a thought process that says spreading something that was told to you isn't wrong, whether it is by mouth or media. It's only the problem of the one who started it. We know that's entirely wrong, but social norms and acceptable behavior often get lost in the media culture.

One of those norms seemingly abandoned is offering an apology when a mistake is made. Serious mistakes were made in the description of the young people's behavior, and those mistakes were multiplied by professional journalists, who spread them without doing any verification of the facts. What happened, without imputing motivation on "Why" it happened, damaged the reputations of students under 18 and their school and community. I have seen a few apologies from journalists who knew they had blundered, but not many.

Sadly, it has come to the point that one of the students and his family are suing multiple media outlets for their role in damaging his character and creating an image of him online that can never be erased. So far, the outlets have not apologized. One put out a half-hearted attempt to indicate they had the facts wrong but so did everyone else, and there was nothing malicious.

Something very bad happened and sorry needs to occur. I hope those who did the damage are sorry and will say it to the ones directly affected and the public. This is a case that is important for the issues of free speech, freedom of the press, and journalistic responsibility, especially as it relates to minors. More importantly, though, it tests major institutions on their willingness to acknowledge wrongdoing and the damage it can inflict. In cases like these, sorry is not only important, it is essential. I do hope they are sorry, so they can begin the process of healing and be an example of the importance of sorry.