

Soul Scrubbin'

Calming the Fears of Confession

All right cowboys and Indians. Try this. Walk up to a person who hasn't showered in a year. Now, take a deep breath. A bit smelly, huh? That's what anybody would smell like after not washing for a year.

Now consider this. When's the last time you washed your soul in the sacrament of penance? A year? Pretty smelly by now. Two years? Really smelly by now. Five years? More? We're talking gas mask application.

I know. I know. I can hear you barking out all the reasons why: "I don't want to give up certain things!", "Why should I confess to a priest?", "I don't want to get chewed out by a priest!" Well, fine. You're not alone. But do yourself a favor. Take five minutes and read this article and see if there's a good reason why you *should* go and give your soul a bath.

Catholic Twin Circle newspaper asked a group of Catholics (many of them young) who still went to church, why they had stopped going to confession. See if you find yourself in their answers, and then read on to see your answers answered.

Fear of the priest

Some people committing sexual sins fear that celibate priests can't understand their sins and what prompts them to commit them. "After all," said a 22-year-old woman, "priests are beyond all that. How can they understand?"

Other Catholics fear priests because of bad experiences in the past. A college student who had confessed to masturbation at age 13, said the priest chewed him out and left him feeling more guilty than when he entered the confessional. But more often, non-confessing Catholics worry about what the priest will think about them. A teenage boy observed: "My parish priest knows me, and I'm afraid he'll recognize my voice. I won't be able to face him again..."

How do I put sin into words?

Some Catholics drop out of confession because they "don't know what to say to the priest." As one teenager put it, "I didn't know how to put my sins into words." And a college student: "My sins became more complex... They didn't fit into any of the simple Ten Commandment patterns."

Moreover, people fear they won't have enough time to explain the "whole story" about the sin if there is a line outside the confessional.

No sense of efficacy of confession

One respondent said: "I lost my temper..., confessed it, and the next week, I was back in the confessional again for the same sin." "I seemed to be staying at the same level of sinfulness," another one said. "Although I was receiving grace from the sacrament, I kept falling into the same holes. So I gave up and stopped receiving the sacrament."

Who needs a middle-man?

Many Catholics see no need for confessing to a priest. "Other Christians... don't go to confession. Why do Catholics need a go-between (priest)."

PRIESTS' REPLIES

After speaking with the Catholics above who, like you, have various reasons for not receiving the sacrament of penance, *Catholic Twin Circle* then asked five priests to anonymously respond. This is what they said:

The laity should not think of priests as saintly men without stain of sin. They should give priests credit for understanding their motivations to sin because priests are made of the same frail human flesh as other people. "That is the very reason why most priests resist a call to the priesthood," said a Pennsylvania priest. "Priests are aware of their own sinful urges and

they wonder how they can ever measure up."

These priests stressed that they have had several years of moral theology and are better acquainted with sin than most Catholics. Said one, "We know about every sin that it is possible to commit, so people shouldn't be afraid of shocking us." Said another, "There are only a certain possible number of variations of sins against the Ten Commandments."

As for the fear that a priest will despise people for their sins, a priest who used to hear 600 confessions a month in Boston said: "If only people realized that most priests feel admiration and respect for people who confess. The worse a sin is, the more respect I feel for the penitent." An Iowa priest added: "There is only one reason why a person confesses and that is because he or she desires to be holy. That is a wonderful, touching thing. It makes me ashamed of my own apathy."

The priests said it was rare to find a confessor who would "chew people out" these days. Said one: "As priests, we know that penitents are sensitive to our attitude."

But another priest stressed that he had also heard complaints that priests weren't strict enough. He pointed out that some young people were asking for tougher penances because they wanted to assuage their guilt. "They don't want a soft word and an easy penance. They want to do something to make reparation."

Regarding the problem of how to put one's sins into the right words, the consensus is that it is best for adults to drop childhood formulas and put the sin simply in their own words. For instance, saying "I was impure," is not as good as saying, "I just slept with a girl I had only just met." The priests suggested that penitents also try to give the reason why they committed the sin. This makes it easier to counsel a person if that is what the person wants.

Said a Milwaukee priest: "Don't be put off by the fact that others are waiting outside the confessional. If you need counseling, tell me. If I am running out of time, I will ask you to come back at another time to really talk."

But what about Catholics committing habitual sins who feel they aren't getting anything out of confession?" A Los Angeles priest had this advice: "Don't give up. Confession is not going to make you perfect. You still suffer from the effects of original sin. Don't be disappointed that you are human, but remember that the worst sin is to stay down once you fall. It doesn't matter how many times you pick yourself up, as long as you do keep picking yourself up."

This brings us to the final complaint: Why do we need a middle man to confess our sins to? When St. John the Baptist was preaching repentance, people came "confessing their sins," before they were baptized. And St. James in his epistle tells us: "Confess therefore your sins one to another."

People recognize today the need to "get it off your chest" by telling someone else your sins. Moreover, having to recount your sins to a priest forces you to consider them more closely, on a regular basis, so that you know what you must work on the most.

But above all, the reason we confess to a priest is because Christ told us to do it that way. Christ's mission was redemptive—from forgiving sins to healing people. And Christ appointed his Apostles to do the same, telling them, "Whose sins you forgive they are forgiven. Whose sins you retain, they are retained." (John 20:21-23).

When the priest absolves us, he is acting in the place of Christ, through the ministry of his ordination. Said St. Paul: "What I have pardoned...for your sakes have I done it in the person of Christ." (2 Cor. 2:10). The blessing we receive is Christ's own blessing; the grace we receive is God's grace, without which we cannot hope to become like Him and obtain everlasting life.

Go ahead, make a new year's resolution. Give your soul a bath. It's about time.

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