

## Easter Confessions

John Madigan

As a child, growing up in a small parish in rural Ontario, I recall the confessional line-up to make one's "Easter Duty". Most Catholics, in those days, regularly went to Sunday Mass and, two or three times a month, to Confession. Before Easter, the confessional lines were especially long due to the addition of those who didn't frequent the church as often. On the way home, one of my older brothers may have quipped with some dogmatic arrogance, "Did you notice old Billy went to confession tonight?"

Today, the confessional box is a relic of an era when the sacrament was central to Catholic life. Vatican II aimed to shed new light on the perception of the sacrament by changing the name and the understanding of it to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Yet, the confessional box has become nothing more than a closet for cleaning products or a place to stack the extra chairs needed for the funerals or weddings of prominent citizens. Many Catholics have stopped going to Confession altogether or, perhaps, go just at Christmas or Easter.

Nobody talks about sin nowadays. We have gone from a world where 'sin was everywhere' to a place where 'sin is nowhere'. Pope Pius XI is said to have stated that, "The sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin." In our time, perhaps that can be attributed to the increasing global individualism, a moving away from values that emphasize family and community ties toward more individualistic values such as independence, uniqueness, personal choice, and self-expression. Yet one doesn't have to look hard to find sin, that which causes a rupture in our relationships and our communion with others. To name a few, think of infidelity, rampant exploitation, selfishness, abuse of privilege, excessive consumption, and abuse of power.

Yet, the Church is slow to change. Just before the pandemic, a local parish announced in the bulletin that a Reconciliation Service would be held on Tuesday evening and that a number of visiting priests would be present to assist. While only about twenty parishioners went to confession occasionally, the event could have had valuable symbolism, a community of people taking a pause to evaluate where they are on their journey; that they are called to provide healing and forgiveness to one another. Lay leaders could have been involved in organizing and managing the event. It may have been an important social event for the priests, too, isolated and burdened with declining numbers and in clustered parishes as they are, and it could have been an effective evening of adult catechesis on sin and forgiveness. With the aging and decline in the population of priests, with fewer than one or two seminarians in each diocese, it seems the time is right to consider a new rite, a new format involving the laity and how a community might organize itself around the sacrament.

Last Easter, a parish announced in the local paper, and in the bulletin, that confessions will be available Holy Saturday evening at 5:00 p.m. I thought the announcement demonstrated that we have a long way to go with the catechesis on the meaning and rite of the sacrament. However, my dad would have liked this new five-o'clock format as he would have been able to have an "End-of-Lent bracer" before heading out for confession.

During the pandemic I read how a parish in Ireland held a Zoom celebration of Reconciliation. The attendees reflected on some scripture readings, spent some moments in an examination of conscience, and recited bidding prayers seeking forgiveness. However, it was announced that absolution would not be part of the “celebration” since the ceremony did not meet the requirements for the elements of general absolution as defined by the church. What a missed opportunity!

Still, we know that virtual absolution is not a new idea. For more than fifty years, a plenary indulgence (including the remission of sins) is granted to those who, with certain provisions, listen to the Pope’s *Orbi et Urbi* broadcast live by television or radio.

Years ago, I read an article by Father Gregory Baum, a well-known Canadian priest and theologian. Father Baum pointed out that, as part of the Penitential Act, in preparation for the Eucharist, we begin the liturgy by confessing our sins in the Confiteor. “I confess to almighty God and to you my brothers and sisters”... Then, the celebrant concludes with, “May Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.” Baum asks, “Who is to say that our sins are not forgiven?”

Pádraig McCarthy, a member of the Association of Catholic Priests, (Ireland) writes that because of the way the importance of confession was promoted in bygone days, many people came to believe that sin could not be forgiven except through sacramental confession. He indicates that apart from the sacramental ways of forgiveness, there are a number of other traditional ways:

- We can know God’s forgiveness as we confess our sins to God (PS 51);
  - By confessing our sins to one another (James 5:16);
  - By correcting a sinner (James 5:20)
  - In loving one another (1 Peter 4:8)
  - By forgiving one another (Luke 6:37)
  - By Almsgiving (Luke 11:41)
- Etc.

The origin of the sacrament can be traced back to the early Church and practices changed over the centuries from penitential services to public penance. Private confession to a priest had become the norm by the sixth century and by the thirteenth century it was mandatory at least once a year. Today, Church Law requires confession at least once a year only of grave sins. Vatican II emphasized the importance of individual conscience while underlining the role of the penitent, the communal nature of sin, and the need for social justice. Pope Francis encourages us to be “a Church for the poor, one that welcomes the refugee”. He warns against “a scrupulous concern for the Church’s liturgy, doctrine and prestige, that this is a modern-day heresy.”

Maybe old Billy had it right. Joining the line for an occasional confession as part of the community makes the public statement that one is not perfect, that one needs communal forgiveness. However, besides the confessional, there are many other paths to forgiveness, many other roads to be led in the way of love.

*(About the author: John Madigan grew up in a small rural parish in eastern Ontario and spent forty years in Ontario's education system as a teacher, school principal, and a school board administrator. He says that like so many others all over the world, new conditions and discoveries are forcing him to reassess his religious traditions and that he is more comfortable pondering the questions than obsessing over the right answers.)*