

# The Time of Renewal.

## Part VII: Catholics and Confession.

### Survey Report

This is the seventh article in a nine-week series based on a recent opinion survey conducted by the Catholic Diocese of Rochester.

The sample questions to the right were taken from that part of the survey which deals with this week's topic: The changing role of Confession in the expression of Catholic faith.

The survey shows that although Confession is recognized as an important spiritual resource, more than 70% of the Catholics attend less often than they once did. And, most Catholics no longer expect, or want, "automatic" forgiveness through Confession. They seek guidelines, not rules, from the Church.

Those Catholics who are most aware of their faith in their daily lives are most likely to want clear-cut directives from the Church in regard to what is or is not a sin. Just under 25% of the Catholics want the same kind of positive direction that the Church used to give them.

28% look to the Church not for strict rules but for guidance about sin that is relevant to modern society and can be reconciled with the practicalities of daily life. One out of five Catholics, frequently the one who is least conscious of his faith's impact on his daily life, relies not on the Church, but on his own interpretations and conscience when faced with a question of sin.

The following questions appeared in the recent Diocesan Time of Renewal Survey.

If you miss Sunday Mass when you could have easily attended, do you consider:

- It is a sin and feel increased need for confession
- It is a sin but I don't worry about it
- The true Christian concept of sin really doesn't apply to this anymore
- The relation of sin and going to Mass is uncertain and confusing
- No opinion

In your opinion, what kind of guidance is most important for a good Catholic in regard to sin?

- Clear-cut directives like the Church used to have
- Guidelines to follow related to modern reality
- Church opinions and pronouncements which most Catholics can accept
- His own interpretation and conscience
- Uncertain how I feel
- None, the idea is outmoded

there have been serious sins since the last time. Another 33% find Confession spiritually helpful. The question regarding understanding of the role of Confession brought the highest write-in response (10%) of any in the survey. The most frequent write-in comment indicated that Confession gives an individual the opportunity to reflect upon his actions.

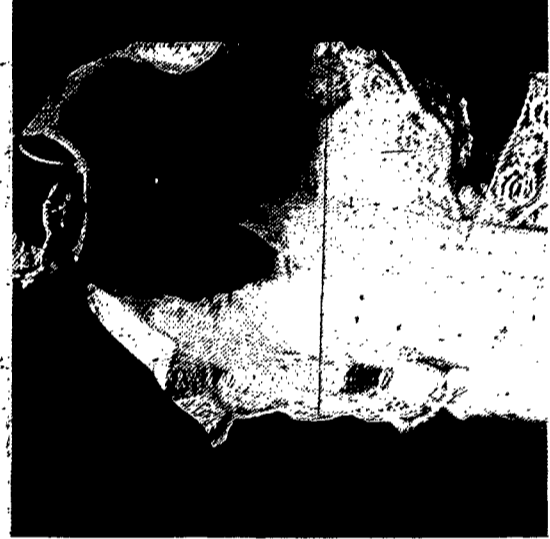
Which one statement most closely describes your understanding of Confession?

- Necessary every time I plan to go to Communion
- Helpful for my spiritual growth and counselling even when there are no serious sins to confess
- Necessary if there have been serious sins since my last Communion
- Other (SPECIFY)

Do you go to confession MORE or LESS often than you once did or like to?

- More
- About the same
- Less

Survey questions related to each weekly topic will be printed here throughout the Time of Renewal newspaper series. The completed survey, answers and findings will be published in a book, "Dialogue For Renewal", available this Fall.



Confession is no longer required before First Communion.

But, at the same time many are confused and divided about the decision that now, because of the Church's new emphasis on increasing individual responsibility, they must make personally. Absolute rules were

### Church Commentary

One thing we now seldom see in a Catholic Church on a Saturday night is a line waiting to go to Confession. People go less often than they once did. Why is this so? Is it a sign of weakening faith?

Maybe yes, and maybe no. Going to Confession was never very easy. The confusion following Vatican II may have served some people as an excuse not to worry much about going to Confession.

Others confess less often because they say Confession is necessary, strictly speaking, only for mortal sins. And, strictly speaking, they are right! But, these people seem to view sin only as an isolated action and as a private affair between oneself and God.

Baptism is the start of the Christian life. "Born again," a person is united with God and with all other Christians. This deep attachment to God is something like the one a man and woman make at their marriage. In marriage, this basic relationship is always present (unless broken by a divorce) and the acts of love are not something apart from it. They are an expression of the relationship which deepens it.

Confession is, then, not only a means of re-establishing a broken relationship with God, but also a means of strengthening an unbroken one.

Married love cannot be taken for granted, but must be reaffirmed often. So, too, the Sacrament of Penance should be used frequently to strengthen and deepen our love-relationship with God. Even the routine of daily life helps build up in husband and wife a sense of togetherness. So, too, the routine of frequent Confession brings God and man into even greater intimacy. From this perspective, going to Confession is not a question of *having* to go, but of *wanting* to go!

To undervalue Confession is a serious mistake. Although Confession has never been required before every Communion, frequent Confession sensitizes us to the presence of God in our lives. The more sensitive we are to God's love, the more sensitive we will be to any failure on our part to return that love. To pray in silence for God's mercy is good. To reinforce that prayer by Confession is better. If we declare our sins to another, we are less apt to forget our repentance and are more aware of God's forgiving love. Furthermore, the sacrament reminds us that sin is not just a private affair between God and ourselves. It involves responsibility to the whole Christian community, represented by the priest to whom we confess.

Ideally, we should go to Confession frequently. What should concern us most is not any one particular failure, but the basic direction in which our lives are moving. Do our individual actions indicate a growth in unselfishness or in self-centeredness? The Christian life is an invitation to love God unselfishly with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourselves. When we become careless in that task, Confession is a powerful help to a new start.

Next week, Part VIII: Catholic Priests and Nuns.

