



# CATHOLIC COURIER

Diocese of Rochester Thursday, August 2, 1990 50¢ 16 pages

## Bless me, Father...

### Catholics adapt to evolving penance rites

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

*No one goes to confession any more. Widespread abuse of the "third rite" — general absolution — is taking place. People today have no sense of sin or morality.*

These statements typify sentiments voiced again and again within some Catholic circles.

The problem is that these statements are not true — at least not according to the results of two recent studies.

"Reflections on the Sacrament of Penance in Catholic Life Today: A Study Document," released in January, 1990, by the U.S. Catholic Conference, shows that while the number of people going to frequent confession has decreased, Catholics still seek sacramental reconciliation.

"Of Piety and Planning: Liturgy, the Parishioners and the Professionals," a 1985 report conducted by Mark Searle and David Leege as part of *The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Life Since Vatican II* (published in 1987), concluded that while frequent confession is no longer a part of religious consciousness for most Catholics, confession remains a part of Catholic identity for the majority of active, practicing Catholics.

Further, both studies indicate that the controversial third rite of general absolution is infrequently used — and even where it is used, researchers say, it has not had a negative effect on the use of the first two rites. Confusion over the natures of sin and morality, the studies show, results not from a loss of the sense of evil

in the world, but from poor catechesis.

Thus the picture is not as dark as some would paint it. Neither, however, is it as rosy as others might wish it to be.

"The issue is not that we have all these Catholics out there who don't go to confession," remarked Father Michael Walsh, executive director of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Research and Practices Committee, which produced the bishops' study. "What (the report) does do, it points out some significant challenges that face the church," he said.

The study grew out of the 1983 Synod of Bishops and Pope John Paul II's subsequent exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, released in 1984.

At the time the bishops' committee began its study, no reliable figures were available to support conclusions about what was happening to confession in the United States, Father Walsh observed.

"One of the things that became clear is that there was all sorts of opinion and anecdotal evidence about what that situation was," Father Walsh said. The results of the study, he concluded, showed that many of those opinions and much of such evidence could not be supported.

The study — consisting of separate surveys of bishops, priests and lay people — revealed that 81 percent of lay people surveyed still went to confession. Nine percent went to confession weekly or monthly, while 72 percent went at least once a year.

The study also indicated that people are now aware of and are using other means of experiencing reconciliation —

including reception of the Eucharist and personal prayer — instead of going to confession only.

Although the study showed a decline in the number of people who went to frequent confession — the norm in pre-Vatican II days — that decrease was not necessarily out of line with Catholic practice, Father Walsh noted.

"The frequency of confession that was the common experience of Catholics in the 1940s, '50s, and the early 1960s, when you look at that historically, that's an anomaly," he said. "I think what many people have in mind (when they talk about the declining numbers) was the practice of the 1950s when frequent confession was the norm."

Leege, one of the authors of the Notre Dame study, likewise noted that the charge that people are no longer using confession is based on an experience of the sacrament as it was practiced prior to the Second Vatican Council.

"That picture of confession was just one time period," Leege said. "It was a time period when the style of religiosity was very private."

The decline in the number of people confessing frequently is in part a result of changes in the church, Leege suggested. "The decline in availability of priests and the increase of the understanding of faith as a communal thing moves us away from that (private) model," he explained.

The Notre Dame study arrived at figures similar to those contained in the bishops' study. Seven percent of the  
Continued on page 2

7  
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C  
19  
34