

Catholics

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surveyed Catholics said they went to confession either weekly or monthly; 33 percent went several times a year; and 35 percent went at least once a year.

In accounting for the decline, the bishops' study surfaced several factors, including the emphasis in U.S. society on individualism (in contrast with the communal nature of Catholicism) and on society's pluralistic nature, which, Father Walsh noted, leads "to a kind of relativism of Catholic identity and practice."

The report also cited the media as a major influence on Catholic attitudes toward morality, the church and confession. Media, Father Walsh explained, present an anti-authoritarian bias. Religious people are often portrayed as wicked or foolish. Actions are not measured against ultimate values. And, "evil is presented to us for our entertainment," which, he observed, "dulls the sense of the individual about the presence of evil in their lives. We become blind to the areas in our lives where (we) need conversion."

Father Henry Fehren, a U.S. Catholic columnist who has written about confession for the magazine, noted that Catholics' understanding of the nature of evil is confused.

"There's a kind of fuzziness about things," Father Fehren said. "The problem is in the past we were taught to feel guilty about the wrong things."

When Vatican II mandated a different understanding of sin — moving away from a private understanding of the nature of sin to a more communal one — Catholics began to reject the entire concept of sin,

Father Fehren observed. This trend was further encouraged by a society that did not take sin seriously. "Sin became out of fashion, and we joked about it," he remarked.

But sin does exist, Father Fehren asserted. "It's a reality in the Scripture — or else Jesus wouldn't have been worried about it," he said.

The problem, Father Fehren continued, "was bad moral education" that lacked a Gospel-based presentation of morality.

The new rites for the sacrament of reconciliation, however, require an understanding of the nature of sin that goes far deeper than the "laundry list" notion common prior to the council, Father Walsh acknowledged. Thus, the bishops' study calls for greater catechesis for lay people so that they will better understand the nature of evil in their lives, and the social consequences of evil.

This process appears to be going on, Father Walsh said, pointing out that the survey does not support the conclusion that people lack awareness of sin. The difficulty, he said, was that as people began to move beyond the elementary understanding of sin fostered by the old catechism and the parochial-school education they received as children, they began to have difficulty in naming the sins during confession.

The newer rites require penitents to delve more deeply into themselves when confessing. Thus, Father Walsh continued, the penitent now begins to look at the root causes that lead to sinful acts. The sacrament of reconciliation then becomes much more of a counseling session.

Just as the new rites require more of penitents, they also require more of priests. A second recommendation in the bishops' study is that priests be afforded

more opportunities for education to prepare them to be better confessors.

Further, the bishops' study recommends greater use of the second rite — a community celebration combined with individual confessions. This was also one of the suggestions in the Notre Dame report.

The second rite, Leege said, provides a symbol of the nature of sin. "It stresses personal responsibility and communal responsibility to the faith community," he said.

The Notre Dame study also showed that the availability of Rites II and III has not led people to neglect Rite I — individual confession. The study indicated that those who used the second and third rites also made use of the first rite.

Father Thomas Mull, a consultant with the Diocese of Rochester's Office of Liturgy, noted that the bishops' study reflects with fair accuracy the diocese's experience with confession.

Penance is available in first-rite form in all parishes, and most parishes celebrate the second rite at least twice a year — during Advent and Lent. Rite III, while it does take place, is far less common in the diocese, he acknowledged.

When the new rites were introduced in the 1970s, all priests in the diocese received information about the changes the rites encompassed. In addition, workshops, speakers and literature have been consistently available to keep priests up-to-date about the sacrament, Father Mull said.

Still, he added, "I don't think we are doing the celebration well. I think we are in transition, doing a little of the old rite and a little of the new."

A spot survey of parishes revealed that while the number of people going to frequent confession has declined, the effect of this drop has not necessarily been negative.

"My conclusion is that the numbers are down, but the quality is up," remarked Father William Gordinier, pastor of St. Mary's, Geneseo.

"It's not just a laundry list any more," Father Gordinier said. "The (penitents) are doing it thoughtfully. They want to sit down and talk about their problems more at depth."

Father Gerard Hafner, pastor of St. Columba, Caledonia, and St. Patrick, Mumford, has likewise found that the quality of confessions has improved. "I think that the majority of people are looking deeply into things," he said. "I think that's why the communal celebrations are so well received."

One parish that offers only Rite I is Our Lady of Victory in Rochester. According to Father Leo Dunn, CSSR, one of the parish's parochial vicars, the parish is in a unique situation because of its downtown location and because people go there for confession before the daily noon Mass.

Still, he said, he has noticed a difference in the way people confess since the new rites were unveiled. "I think for the most part people are more relaxed than by trying to get things done by the numbers," he said.

Father Dunn said that the number of people going to confession and other sacraments is affected by the culture, adding, "I think our culture — the Western culture — has lost its sense of faith."

This effect of the prevailing culture on Catholics points to the need for more catechesis and evangelization, according to Father Walsh. "Confession is seen as part of a broader picture," he said.

Thus reconciliation with God should not be measured simply in terms of the number of times one goes to confession, Father Walsh observed.

A newer understanding of confession can be reached through a better understanding of the nature of sin, Father Gordinier suggested.

"We're trying to be as Christ-like as possible, and anything less than that is sin," he said.

"People are seeing that you don't have to go to confession 52 times a year," Father Gordinier continued. "When they feel themselves drifting away from Christ, that's the time to make some resolutions and to go and say, 'This is the way I'm drifting away from Christ.'"

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