

COLUMNISTS

Communal penance not an 'easy out'

Some of the churches in southeast Monroe County are conducting a survey as part of a St. Bernard's on the Road program to determine which aspects of the church's mission are perceived by parishioners to be going well and which ones are thought to need more attention.

Those processing the surveys are expressing surprise that the sacrament of penance is mentioned repeatedly as an area needing more attention.

I have had a hunch for some time that this sacrament is actually caught in an awkward growth stage — if sacraments can have such things!

Most of us are familiar with a form of this ritual that was prominent in catechetics as we grew up. This ritual involved entering the darkened "box," and pronouncing a ritual greeting to the priest that announced how long it had been since previous reception of the sacrament, accompanied by some recitation of sinful acts performed — along with the number of times the evil deeds had been performed. After expressing sorrow and contrition for the bad deeds, the priest spoke words of encouragement and urged continued conversion, and gave a penance.

That ritual is recalled by many as effective at fostering some very positive effects. It reinforced an appreciation for



the
moral
life

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many that "bad deeds" have an effect on our relationship with God, that the church is involved with us in both our sin and repentance, that there is a "conversion pattern" of sorrow for sin, reconciliation before the church, forgiveness from God.

The form of this ritual also instilled a kind of "discipline" for many Catholics. I was always somewhat embarrassed about having to tell another person about my sinful activities. The fact that it was the parish priest, that it took place in a darkened enclosure, that it was to be a great secret, that I would not be able to receive Communion if I failed to "tell all" heightened the mysterious effects of this most uncomfortable of religious requirements. Not too long ago I talked with a Catholic of about my same age who explained her conviction that the

ritual was good for us precisely because it was hard, kept us humble, and focused us on our bad deeds.

That may be the case. We all do well to face the difficult parts of life that are uncomfortable for us. We should all strive against false pride and self-deception, we all want to avoid facing our faults so that we can dwell on our successes.

Still, my early experience of the sacrament of confession — we moved on to call it "penance," then "reconciliation" — eventually came to appear a bit off target precisely because of the way in which it was celebrated.

For one thing, it didn't seem to be "celebrated" at all. For me and for many others, there appeared to be a disjunction between the way we "did" this sacrament and what we were actually attempting to ritualize in sacramental action.

The sacrament is meant to celebrate conversion and God's forgiveness, but that particular ritual seems to focus on us instead — on our sin and sinfulness. The sacrament is meant to ritualize our connection with the church and the community's role in our healing and reconciliation with God, but the ritual seems too individualized. It even appears to isolate us from the others as we experience it. Rather than reinforcing the social nature of sin and forgiveness, it reinforces

individualistic, privatized understandings of sin.

The sacrament is meant to celebrate our relationship with God — a relationship too complex to be reduced to names of deeds done, or frequency of rules broken. A long time ago moral theologians began to reinforce sin not as "laws violated" but as "relationship breached." The type of conversation that allows us to disclose and heal a violated relationship simply cannot be reduced to a list of sin-types with numbers.

Yesterday I spoke with an experienced pastoral minister who explained that a communal penance service draws increasingly large numbers of parishioners, while individual confession remains undersubscribed. I am certain that individual confession can be used in a way that manifests the genuine purpose of the sacrament. But I also think that we need a communal celebration of this sacrament. We should not dismiss communal penance as an easy out for embarrassed Catholics who need discipline in their lives. Communal penance does what the sacrament actually signifies — and that, after all, is the very nature of sacraments.

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