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When was your last confession?

Pat Perriello | Aug. 20, 2012 NCR Today

John Cornwell pens a thoughtful and well-researched article in *The Tablet* [1] on the state of confession in the church today. His data suggest only 2 percent of Catholics confess regularly. While there are pockets of significant use of the confessional, by and large, whole communities are simply not availing themselves of the sacrament.

Cornwell mentions several contributing factors to the current state of affairs, including: bad experiences of the faithful with the sacrament in years past; the sexual abuse crisis, including abuse within or through the confessional; the lack of interest in the mindless recitation of minor offenses with numbers as most of us were taught; a lack of the sense of sin in today's culture; and at the other end of the spectrum, serious problems of scrupulosity. I might just add that in times past, we thought of the priest as "another Christ" or a representative of Christ, which has become more and more difficult as we learn that our priests are all too human.

Are the people in the pews trying to tell the hierarchy something by their actions? Is the hierarchy listening? Does it matter that a significant majority of Catholics do not find the current confessional regimen helpful or necessary? Cornwell seems to want to listen to those in the pews. If he comes up with some answers, will the Vatican care enough to make some changes?

My personal feeling is that the church had the right approach to confession and chose to turn away from it. I continue to believe that the practice of communal penance was a beneficial exercise. For those who believe we are losing our sense of sin, it did much to highlight the wrong we do in the world, especially collectively, and brought us solidarity in seeking pardon for our offenses. Refusing general absolution in these instances seems short-sighted. The idea of coming together as church and confessing our sinfulness cries out for the absolution of the church.

What are we accomplishing by withholding absolution? Those who feel the need for individual confession continue to seek it out. Those who don't are still not going to confession, as attested to by the data. The only result is that the numbers attending communal penance services have dwindled, and we are perhaps farther than ever from an understanding of sin in the world.

There are other ways the church offers forgiveness. The power to forgive sins, highlighted in the Gospels, did not initially revolve around individual confession. The power was seen in the early church as related to baptism. Sins were forgiven or retained by being admitted to baptism. At the beginning of Mass, we confess our sins, and through the priest, pray for forgiveness. The anointing of the sick is another sacrament that forgives sin.

I suggest we reintroduce communal penance with general absolution at Christmas, Easter, and perhaps other appropriate occasions. Individual confession would be available at regular times for those who wish to make use of it. I would continue with the understanding that serious sin is to be absolved through individual confession to the priest, remembering, of course, that as we learned so many years ago, an act of perfect contrition can remove even serious sin.

So what do you think? When was your last confession?

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[1] http://www.thetablet.co.uk/article/163100