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Finding a home in the confessional thanks to Pope Francis

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The Francis Chronicles

I went to confession on Saturday. I think the last time I celebrated the sacrament in a traditional Saturday afternoon setting was more than a decade ago. When someone asked me why I was going, the answer was simple: I was compelled to go because of the pope.

Not because Pope Francis has asked Catholics to get back in the confessional, but because his recent interviews and heartfelt actions as pastor in chief have made me want to be a better person and a more fulfilled, better practicing Catholic. I've felt like I've not only been given hope for the church, but a challenge for myself.

To be clear, I haven't been totally absent from the sacrament of reconciliation, but my primary experience in the past many years has been communal penance services. These liturgies can be moving and are certainly efficient and convenient for all involved. They can be less intimidating for people who have not received the sacrament in a while, so I understand why they are offered.

Yet I never felt quite complete after a penance service. It was like something essential was missing, but I couldn't tell you what. Perhaps it was due to the cattle-call sensation of the whole thing. Hundreds of people with a half-dozen priests at a service that starts at 7:30 p.m. on a school night. Folks are in a hurry even if their best intention is to not be. And I'm not certain contrition can be rushed.

But in my life, regular confessional offerings -- the late Saturday afternoon type -- were inconvenient. Like many Catholics, I preferred my faith practice fit around the rest of my life, not the other way around. Until Saturday. Saturday, I arranged the rest of my life around a sacrament. And I'm telling you, it was good.

Pope Francis has had a positive effect on many people, and I'm not immune. His actions in the first weeks and months of his papacy left me in awe of his humility and kindness, and his recent interviews were even more touching. It isn't just that he seems to understand the urgency of reaching out to the lost sheep or the need for deep examination and discussion of difficult issues affecting Catholic laity and the wider world. It is more: He points out God's mercy in a way that makes it seem absolutely real. And like the sinful woman in Luke's Gospel, unconditional mercy has the tendency to convince one of the need for repentance.

Thus, I found myself standing in a very short line outside a confessional reflecting on the traditional formula for a "good confession": Make it clear, concise, contrite and complete. I've failed on the "complete" part more often than I care to admit, and concise has never been my strong suit. But I was determined, and I knew in a way I haven't known in a very long time that even though this action would be difficult (it is so much easier to avoid facing our dark side than speak it out loud), it would be worth it. And it was. On both counts.

Every day, I hear from Catholics who, like me, are reconsidering their lives, their actions, their faith practice, all because of an Argentine priest who proclaims, "I am a sinner." The pope isn't getting this reaction by outlining a list of do's and don'ts. Instead, the world's parish priest proclaims the message of God's mercy in such human terms one cannot help but listen. He lives a life so obviously influenced by Jesus that one cannot remain unaffected. It is almost as though, if you listen close enough, you can hear him say, without uttering a word, "Try this again; it will lead you to Jesus."

This weekend, I did try it again, walking into a dimly lit confessional, getting on my knees and saying, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." And for the first time in a long time, it felt like home.

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