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Catholic confession making a comeback

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We all have regrets, things we 've done -- or haven 't done -- that we 're sorry for. Some regrets are minor, like having one too many cocktails and telling your best friend that her new hairstyle makes her head look big. Some are major, such as taking credit for a project at work that lands you a promotion even though you missed all of the planning meetings.

Thirty years ago, either of these scenarios, and a host of others, would have landed the guilty party in a line outside a Catholic church on a Saturday afternoon, waiting to confess his latest sins to a priest and receive forgiveness. In recent years, those lines have dwindled and in some cases, disappeared. Only now is confession, which used to be called Penance and now is called the sacrament of Reconciliation, making a comeback. Or is it?

The lost sacrament

Fill in the blank: Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. My last confession was uh

Can 't remember? Don 't worry. You 're not alone. What were once regularly scheduled trips to confession have become memories of Catholic school days complete with school uniforms and habit-wearing nuns.

"Over the last three decades, confession has become a lost sacrament for the majority of practicing Catholics, " says James Donnelly, professor of popular religion at UW-Madison.

Donnelly cites the dissolution of secondary Catholic education as one of the main reasons why Catholics aren 't confessing as regularly as they did in previous generations.

"For teens and young adults with a Catholic education, it was quite common to go to confession on a weekly or monthly basis. Contact with the fundamentals of Catholicism has been greatly curtailed, " says Donnelly.

Free from sin

These days, education is no longer the main conduit between the church and parishioners to the fundamentals of Catholicism, but there 's been no lag in mainstream media filling the void. In a culture that 's been known to base its moral outlook on sound bites from daytime television and best-selling self-help books, the role of confession has taken a back seat to the religion of popular culture.

"Endless amateurs are making all sorts of offers, " says Donnelly.

In previous generations, couples experiencing marital strife would seek guidance from their priest. Donnelly says today people having emotional problems or harboring guilt are just as likely to go to a professional such as a psychiatrist or psychologist.

Donnelly argues that since the implementation of changes made by the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) in 1965, the teachings of the church have made confession less of a priority in Catholics ' lives.

"Sermons used to be about sin and how to free yourself from it and prevent yourself from succumbing to it. Once those themes of fear were internalized, people wanted to free themselves through confession. Today, those themes are not as pervasive and confession isn 't at the forefront of Catholics ' minds, " says Donnelly.

Back in business

The Diocese of Madison consists of 134 parishes in 11 counties of south-central Wisconsin. Brian Kelly, the diocese 's media specialist, says that Bishop Robert Morlino has expounded on Pope Benedict XVI 's philosophy of Eucharistic Consistency, which requires Catholics to be in a reconciled state of grace in order to receive communion.

Unlike the full-blown campaign of the Diocese of Chicago, which opened a separate office and spent a year developing a campaign to increase confessor numbers, the Diocese of Madison is taking a more subtle approach with his philosophy of the importance of confession.

"Bishop Morlino encourages pastors to talk about the importance of Reconciliation when they minister each week, " Kelly says. "He wants people to return to the church. "

Kelly 's office did not have concrete numbers to show Reconciliation was on the rise, but the diocese 's method, following the Vatican 's suggestion of discussing the importance of confession to receive the Eucharist, follows a trend that Donnelly sees picking up steam.

"There is a push by traditionalists from the top down, " says Donnelly. "Pope Benedict is considered a conservative leader compared to his predecessor Pope John Paul II and has found a conservative following among the many archbishops he 's appointed within dioceses across the United States. It 's a push by a small minority but it does amount to some activity. "

If you build it . . .

The spark of resurgence in confessors is most noticeable in Madison on campus; a place where the lure of sin, found in bars and before Badger games, is within walking distance. But so is a church.

St. Paul 's Catholic Center, at 723 State St., reports a rise in the number of students showing up to confess on a regular basis.

Father Randy Timmerman, now at St. John Vianney parish in Janesville,

was the priest at St. Paul 's when the transformation began. He often found himself waiting at the scheduled confession time with very few students showing up. Timmerman credits the increased numbers to an assertive campus-wide campaign to bring students into the church.

"We worked pretty aggressively to get into places where students were. Dorm interns invited students to join them at church. There was also a lot of sidewalk chalking to make students aware of what we offered, " says Timmerman.

The outreach tactics worked, but the real change came with the arrival of sisters of the Apostles of the Interior Life ministry from Italy. The sisters questioned Timmerman as to why the confessionals were filled with boxes. Timmerman explained that due to low numbers, confession was held face-to-face in the sacristy twice a week rather than in the traditional confessionals. The nuns asked Timmerman if he would hold confession in the tiny twin chambers if they cleared them out. Timmerman agreed.

Father Eric Nielsen, now pastor of St. Paul 's, says that low confession attendance resulted in priests holding the sacrament only by appointment.

"This led to many confessionals being used as broom closets, " says Nielsen.

Sister Rafaella Cavellin and Father Victor Mosele cleared out the dust and boxes, and now Nielsen has students who wait 30 minutes at the confession time twice a day.

"There was a real confidence in faith, " says Kelly of the nun 's mission. "Almost like, if you build it, they will come. "

Nielsen says that the anonymity of meeting in the confessional eases some confessors ' anxiety.

"When people come into a church and see the little green light on or other people in line for confession, it makes it easier. "

Everyone sins '

So after years of keeping sins to themselves, what 's compelling people to confess?

Monsignor John Hebl is a retired priest with a Ph.D. in educational psychology. He has done years of research on forgiveness and is on the board of directors for the Madison-based International Forgiveness Institute. Hebl says that Catholics, as well as people of other faiths, seek forgiveness from God to be released from their sins and to be reconciled with not only God but also with members their community. Hebl doesn 't limit sin to a specific denomination but rather looks at it in global terms.

"Unfortunately, everyone sins. Sin is not limited to Catholics, Christians or Jews. It 's a result of our fallen human nature. To pretend that sin doesn 't exist won 't make it go away. "

Nielsen believes the drop in confession over the last 30 years can be attributed to a growing idea throughout society that we didn 't need to be

forgiven for doing wrong.

"For a while after the 1960s, people were taught that we didn 't really need to confess our sins orally, we could just say them to God ourselves. There was an idea from the culture that we lived in an almost sinless world, that we 're not responsible for our bad actions. People are starting to realize the mistake of all this. "

He adds, "Psychologically, we all need to unburden our faults to another and feel accepted. Just ask a hairdresser. "

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