News

A man at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in downtown Pittsburgh enters a confessional after a noon-time mass Tuesday, Jan. 19, 1999. (AP/Keith Srakocic, File)

Giovanna Dell'orto

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The Lenten period for penance started this week with Ash Wednesday, and some Catholic priests are happily bracing for long lines outside the confessional. The faithful across the United States are embracing anew the sacrament that has shifted from embarrassing recitation of sin to cathartic quest for grace.

"They come to confession feeling as if they are terrible, but … they are displaying the fact that they want to be good," said Fr. Patrick Gilger, a Jesuit priest in Chicago. "The fact that somebody shows up to confession is a lived act that they desire holiness."

Most faith traditions have rites of self-restraint, repentance and atonement, often in a prescribed annual period before major holidays.

For Catholics, the sacrament of penance and reconciliation is supposed to be a regular weekly or monthly practice. Penitents tell a priest their sins, pledge not to commit them again, receive forgiveness and go on their way with a penance, able to receive Communion again since they're not supposed to without first confessing any grave sins.

"This becomes kind of a marker for Catholics. It's something they do, which their Protestant and other non-Catholic neighbors don't do," said James O'Toole, a Boston College professor emeritus and author of a new history of confession.

Old sins, new confessions

Until the last decades of the 20th century, Catholics knew the drill. Parishes and schools had lists of sins by grievousness — from the commandment-breaking mortal ones like adultery to venial offenses like talking in church.

Confession was often a quick affair — a recitation of how and how often one sinned, followed by an act of contrition, and a penance like saying 10 Hail Marys. Then came a rapid, steep decline in confession, O'Toole said. It was driven by the growth of psychology and the complexities it revealed in human behavior, major cultural changes on issues like sexual mores, and the clergy abuse scandals.

The Catholic Church does not gather data on confession, so it's hard to quantify current trends, according to the Fr. Thomas Gaunt, who leads Georgetown

University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

But U.S. parishes are noticing an uptick and priests say that, while acknowledging sins and receiving absolution remain core, confession is turning more into a conversation focused on God's mercy and love.

"There's only so many ways to go wrong. There's an infinite number of ways to be right and to have God's life coursing through you," said the Fr. Mike Nugent, who was ordained in 2023 and is parochial vicar at Saint Ambrose Catholic Church in Annandale, Virginia.

It's not that confessors today are handing out get-out-of-hell-free cards — the priest cannot give absolution, or God's forgiveness, if the penitent isn't willing to change. But they try to bring the same mercy that the Gospels show Jesus showering on all manner of sinners.

"What sinfulness is in the Catholic Church's theological understanding is the intentional, willful distancing of oneself from God," said Gilger, who also teaches at Loyola University. "The point of confessing your sins, of attending to sins, is only to allow the God who wants to be with us to rush back into the emptiness that those sins have created."

That's why several priests talk about confession as "therapeutic" — both for the penitent and for the confessor — especially in a society that's keener to judge than to forgive.

"The individual can both confront him or herself, sort of acknowledge these things, and at the same time experience, from God through another person, mercy, forgiveness, and hope," said the Fr. Brendan Hurley. He oversees the penance preparation program at the Pontifical North American College, next to the Vatican, where Nugent studied.

What the sinners want, and confession can provide

The "seal of the confessional" is so absolute that the Vatican has repeatedly fought legislative efforts to compel certain disclosures.

But when they kneel in front of a screen in a wooden confessional, or sit face-to-face with a confessor, most people want to offload a burden and hear a concrete word of encouragement, priests say.

"It's about healing," said Fr. John Kartje, rector of Mundelein Seminary in Illinois and a priest for nearly a quarter century. "You need trust, you need openness, you need vulnerability, you need honesty."

That's why confession has "a strong customer satisfaction rating," said Nugent, with a chuckle. At the end of the month, his parish and all others in the Diocese of Arlington will start holding confessions on Wednesday nights at the same time.

"Knowing that I'm loved even with my struggle, even with sin, even with the things that are challenging and shameful in my life, that I am still loved perfectly — my gosh, that is good news," Nugent added.

Priests can bring relief in dramatically urgent confessions, from those who have hours left to live or who tell the confessor a major fault that they have never spoken out loud, like cheating or stealing.

Other times, they might need to nudge an overly vague penitent who only mumbles, "I haven't been true to myself" or finds it hard to accept that the church considers sinful something that's broadly accepted, like contraception.

What priests say they do not do is roll their eyes, literally, at whatever revelation — or strike the fire-and-brimstone tone. Instead, they focus on reminding people that God's love is still close.

"Then people know that the thing that they're doing is what's keeping them away from God," Gilger said.

Preparing for a heavy duty that becomes a highlight of ministry

Historically, seminarians studied moral theology and manuals that amounted to "clear rule books," which were broadly reflected in what people learned through catechism, according to O'Toole.

While there are still penance classes toward the end of seminarians' studies, today's emphasis is on "creating a space where the penitent can feel comfortable," Hurley said.

That's why seminarians practice with professors and each other, and also go to confession themselves regularly — something that all priests do, including the pope.

Ultimately, going to and administering confession is an act of faith.

"I think the learning curve when you first get out (of seminary) is … don't fall in the trap of thinking this is all on you, because sometimes that leads to being overly strict," Kartje said. "I'm hearing your confession. I'm saying the words of absolution. But the only real healer is the Holy Spirit."

The belief that they're the conduit for God's grace to a struggling person is what makes many priests love spending hours listening to a litany of bad behaviors.

"You're not just there for what Jesus is doing in healing that person. You also have this privileged role in being present as someone shows incredible virtue," Nugent said. "When someone comes and says, 'Father, these are the things I've done,' there's so much honesty, there's so much humility, a great generosity of spirit, a great faith in the God who will forgive them."

Yes, sitting on the other side of the confessional's grille can be grueling — but also rewarding, Gilger added.

"I remember some confessions, the hard things people said, but … mostly what I remember is how amazing people are, and it's immensely consoling," he said.