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The people speak on confession

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NCR Today

Many spoke out on their feelings about confession in response to my blog entry "When was your Last Confession?" A few things stand out regarding not only the number of responses received, but their intensity.

I'm confident the respondents represent only the tip of the iceberg. Just about every Catholic out there has had good and/or bad experiences with confession and has formed strong feelings and opinions regarding how the sacrament of penance should be celebrated. It is also interesting that the breakdown of responses does not fall along traditional liberal/conservative fault lines. Many Catholics who are conservative have serious qualms about going into the confessional, be it the traditional box or a small room with two chairs.

One respondent did ask what general absolution actually means. Does it need to be followed up with individual confession? My understanding is that general absolution absolves all sins, as it did for soldiers who were going into battle. During the period when churches were offering general absolution at penance services, some priests were encouraging those who were conscious of serious sin to follow up with individual confession. Also, some of those penance services did have individual confessions available at the end of the service for those who wanted it, but general absolution basically means absolution for all sins. More astute theologians might want to offer additional comments regarding this question.

It does seem that if there is an issue where lay input could be valuable to church leaders, confession would surely qualify. It is a sacrament that applies to every Catholic. Every Catholic has felt both the blessings and the not-so-blessed aspects of this sacrament. Learning from their experiences and making adjustments based on those experiences would seem to be a no-brainer. If it is the intent of the church to provide its parishioners with the loving mercy and reconciliation of our Lord, seeking the best way of making that happen for the people would seem a critical part of the mission of the church.

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