

Why aren't Catholics going to Confession any more?



Fr Mychal Judge is a remarkable hero. He was chaplain to the New York firefighters at the World Trade Center on 9/11, where he heard confessions of the conscious injured, and gave the last rites and general absolution to the dying. Then he was killed by falling masonry. His story ennobled the role of the Catholic priest as confessor, a role which has been in decline for quite some time. For the impression that the faithful have abandoned confession – the Sacrament of Reconciliation – throughout the world is overwhelming.

Researching a book on confession these past two years, I have found it difficult to ascertain reliable figures. Questionnaires on religious practice in the UK and Europe no longer even itemise the rate of attendance. In the United States, the 2008 census by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (Cara), revealed that only 2 per cent of Catholics confess regularly.

Anecdotal evidence for Ireland and the UK suggests a massive decline since the 1960s, and yet a mixed current picture is emerging.

One priest told me that in his rural parish in Oxfordshire, no one has come to confession for 10 years.

Another in a Midlands industrial district reports that he never gets more than two penitents on a Saturday evening. In a straw poll survey of my friends, who lived through Vatican II, one in three have not been to confession for 30 years. For the rest, “every year or so”, or “once or twice a year”.

According to most pastors I speak to, children nowadays rarely return to the sacrament after their first Communion unless part of an impetus once a term from the local Catholic school.

And yet, there are inner-city parishes and cathedral churches where the sacrament is popular among every age group, including young adults. Many, seeking anonymity, are from distant parishes. A 26-year-old woman who converted to Catholicism aged 16, speaks of “queues” for confession at the Brompton Oratory and St James’s, Spanish Place in London. She likes to go to confession at least once month, but does not confess in her home parish in north London, because, she says, the sacrament is only available there “on application”.

The understanding of sin and confession today appears to pull in different directions, reflecting wider tensions in the Church. A recent convert informant, instructed in a traditionalist mode, has been taught that missing Mass is a serious sin requiring absolution before receiving the Eucharist. In contrast, a pastor of a large East End of London parish tells me that he never speaks of sin. “We have encouraged teenagers in our local Catholic school to see Reconciliation as an opportunity to talk about their experience of life, and their difficulties.”

The popularity of confession among groups of teenagers is clearly visible at World Youth Days, where the young queue in their hundreds to receive one-to-one absolution.

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