

Confession: a sacrament in decline



Catholics of my generation, brought up in the faith before the Second Vatican Council, often went to confession weekly, and never less than monthly, as did our parents and grandparents. Today, the majority of Catholics in many parts of the world have stopped going to confession regularly; some have stopped going to confession altogether.

Over the past two years I have been researching a book on the history of confession and its current practice, and I have found it difficult to arrive at an accurate overall picture.

In the United States, social surveys run by the Catholic Church reveal that only two percent of the country's 67 million members of the faithful go to confession regularly. In my own country, the United Kingdom, there are no accurate figures, as the questionnaires on devotional practice don't ask about confession nowadays.

While children still make their first confession at about the age of seven, they tend not to go again until their confirmation at 13 or 14, unless they are encouraged to go by their schools (even then, it would only be once a term).

What I have ascertained in the UK, Ireland, and much of Europe is that confession in most parishes has ceased to be a regular part of Catholic life, but you will still see penitents queuing for confession in large city churches and cathedrals.

People have told me in interviews that they go to these larger churches because they wish to remain anonymous and make their confession in the old fashioned box. There is a resistance to the practice of face-to-face confession that came in after Vatican II.

There have been many reasons given for the collapse in the practice of confession. The eminent moral theologian Bernard Haring argued that many young, sexually active and married Catholics found a problem with contraception.

Officially they knew, and know, that it is a mortal sin, so they needed to confess it as a sin; and yet, they did not think that they were doing anything wrong.

While there may be something in Haring's argument, I have been struck by a historical perspective. Perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Instead of asking why have people stopped going to confession, we should be asking why the Catholics of my childhood, and that of my parents and grandparents, went to confession so often in the first place.

The history of confession reveals that the sacrament has had a long and slow evolution since the Early Church. In the first centuries of Christianity, there was a rite of reconciliation for Christians who had committed major sins that separated them from the Church – sins such as apostasy, murder, and adultery. This was only allowed once in a person's lifetime.

It was only halfway through the first millennium that repeated confessions came in, largely through the monks of Ireland and Wales, who practised frequent absolution within their monasteries as part of one-to-one spiritual direction.

This became popular throughout the Church at large in the West of Europe. But it was not until 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council that Christians were obliged to go to confession (and communion) once a year, at Eastertide.

Outside of religious life, people still did not go to confession regularly through the Middle Ages, and even after the Reformation, when the Church went through a thorough overhaul following the Council of Trent, the faithful tended to go to confession rarely.

And there was another difference. The age at which first confession was made (along with first communion) was normally 13 or 14, with some local exceptions. Even Sainte Therese de Lisieux, who did everything in her spiritual life at a younger age, made her first confession at the age of nearly 13.

The great change in practice came in 1905 when Pope Pius X (1903-1914) decreed that children should make their first confession and communion at the age of seven, which meant that they had to be catechized in the matters of sin, venial and mortal, and their consequences, from the age of six.

Pius X also decreed that confession and communion should be made weekly, if possible. While this was a good thing from the point of view of the Eucharist and full participation in the Mass, it was another matter as far as confession was concerned.

There is a lot of evidence that the generations brought up in the faith from the first decade of the twentieth century until the 1970s found confession problematic in childhood. Confessors, too, found it problematic: all those petty laundry lists of sins.

Pius X's changes, rapid and unprecedented, were done with the best of intentions. He wanted to make confession a routinely devotional practice, and in so doing trivialised the process.

Although for many children, it was by no means a trivial experience. Many of my correspondents – aged between 60 and 80 – report that they found confession traumatic, especially as they approached puberty. To this day they carry much hurt and unresolved guilt, especially in relation to sexual sins.

Pope Benedict has advocated a return to confession in this coming year of Faith. Will the faithful ever return to confession as we did in my childhood? And should they?

The time has surely come for an open discussion throughout the Church on this important sacrament. I don't think that we can go back to the Church of the great Piuses of the twentieth century, nor is this a matter simply for new Vatican dictates.

What do the faithful of all ages think about confession? I hope that people will offer their views openly and honestly.

Asia is a whole new world for the Catholic Church. In the post-colonial period since the middle of the last century, local churches have grown abundantly – in some case like Korea, exponentially. But, again, there is no evidence of the practice of confession in Asia.

If you would like to contribute your experience and help me to fill out a worldwide picture of the practice of confession, please contact me directly at jc224@cam.ac.uk.

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