

My Journey with the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Part of the ministry of Bethany Ministries, when I am not on the road with Sr. Anna Tantsits, IHM doing retreats and Parish Missions, has been covering Masses for priests who are pastors or sacramental ministers who are sick or on vacation or just want their people to hear a new voice. Anna usually travels with me, and regularly listens to my homilies before I give them, providing valuable insights about how people in the pews are likely to hear what I say and making suggestions about changes, additions or deletions.

Since the beginning of Advent, and through the Christmas Season, I have covered Masses over five weekends in four different parishes in the Diocese of Albany. During those weekends, I heard confessions *after* the Saturday Masses, and, eventually, after the Sunday Mass(es) as well. The response was amazing! I was celebrating the sacrament on the average for 45 minutes after each Mass. In one parish, I heard confessions steadily for about 4 hours over two weekends. And almost none of them were "confessions of devotion."

Most of the people spent significant time reflecting with me about the roots of their sinfulness and many had been away from the sacrament for long periods of time. The hunger was so deep that a line formed after the 8:30 Mass in one parish because people had read in the bulletin that I would be available after the Mass - even though I forgot to remind them, and had actually forgotten that I had promised to be available for confessions after I greeted people at the door. I guess people do actually read the parish bulletin when it touches something they feel a need for.

This has been one of the best experiences I have had with the Sacrament of Penance in my 42 years as a priest. The only similar experience I have had has been while leading Parish Missions - and I witnessed as many life changing encounters as on some Missions. I felt like one of the early Franciscan Mission preachers who would spend a week hearing confessions before or after doing a Parish Mission.

This has also led me to suspect that celebrating the sacrament after Mass rather than before yields more and deeper spiritual fruit, especially after the Saturday Mass. I think this is true especially for a visiting priest, since the congregation will have an opportunity to get to know him a little through his presiding and preaching. A resident pastor might not have the time to do it after Mass all the time but could do it this way when the parish schedule or the availability of another priest makes it possible.

The lay people I have shared this with confirm that they would be more likely to approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation if it were offered after a Saturday or Sunday Mass rather than before. They told me that they would not have to be self-conscious about taking more time or making Mass start late. Many of those who came to me expressed a hunger and a need to take time to celebrate the Sacrament individually on occasion, even though they attended communal celebrations and valued them as well.

This past Advent/Christmas season has renewed my enthusiasm as a Friar and a priest, deepened my experience of the power of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and made me more aware of the hunger for reconciliation in the people we serve.