

FROM THE PASTOR'S



Second Sunday of Lent March 8, 2009 B

RESULTS OF SIN AND RECONCILIATION SURVEY

In December I had a Sin and Reconciliation Survey in the bulletin and I had the attendees at the Sunday 5:30PM Mass fill out the survey during Mass. Others mailed in their responses.

On the survey there was an opportunity to check off one of five age categories. Results: Teens (47); 20-35 year olds (25); 36-50 (107); 51-65 (102); 66+ (72); no response (2). Gender: Female (176); Male (91); No response (88). There was no noticeable difference in the responses among the various age groups. **Total number surveyed 355.**

QUESTIONS ON SIN

1. People today are less conscious of sin than in the past: Agree 326 (92%); Disagree 26 (7%)

2. The loss of the sense of sin is due to materialism 185 (52%); faulty faith formation 165 (46%); confusion about sin 132 (37%); lack of preaching about sin 67 (19%)

Other Sample Responses: The moral decline of society; growing secularism; the media; a culture in which anything goes.

3. To me sin is (general definition).... We had 303 responses to this question. Common responses: going against the Ten Commandments, not doing God's will; doing something I know to be wrong; doing harm to another intentionally; anything that hurts one's relationship with God.

4. I normally look at sin in terms of commission (wrong actions) rather than of omission (the good I could have done): Agree 280 (78%); Disagree 65 (19%);

5. When examining your conscience, what guide do you use? We had 267 responses. The most common response was the Ten Commandments. Many said; that they ask themselves the WWJD question. Some use the examination of conscience in my *Preparing for the Sacrament of Reconciliation* booklet.

Other miscellaneous responses: The Bible; Church teaching; examination of conscience handouts; what made me feel guilty; what I learned growing up about right and wrong

6. Rate the following actions: A (seriously sinful); B (wrong, but not serious); C (not sinful)

MORAL ISSUES	A	B	C	No
1. Failing to pray on a regular basis	74 (21%)	207 (58%)	66 (19%)	8
2. Failing to seek God's guidance about serious decisions	81 (23%)	200 (56%)	67 (19%)	7
3. Rarely or never making time for spiritual reading	55 (16%)	217 (61%)	66 (19%)	7
4. Rarely or never making time to grow in my understanding of the Catholic faith	78 (22%)	212 (60%)	56 (16%)	9
5. Missing Mass for no good reason	237 (67%)	100 (28%)	13 (4%)	5
6. Failing to actively participate in Mass	102 (29%)	202 (57%)	43 (12%)	8
7. Treating others in a mean-spirited way	280 (79%)	65 (18%)	4 (1%)	6
8. Damaging the good name of others	316 (89%)	31 (9%)	3 (1%)	5
9. Deliberately choosing not to forgive	285 (80.5%)	55 (15.5%)	9 (2.5%)	5
10. Stealing	334 (94%)	10 (3%)	4 (1%)	6
11. Speaking to others in a rude way	117 (33%)	219 (62%)	13 (4%)	6
12. Giving one's spouse or co-worker the silent treatment	88 (25%)	222 (63%)	38 (10%)	6
13. Sex outside of marriage	316 (89%)	27 (7.5)	6 (1.5%)	6
14. Looking at pornography	287 (81%)	53 (15%)	8 (2%)	6
15. Failing to share financial resources with the poor	141 (40%)	184 (52%)	24 (7%)	6
16. Failing to share financial resources with one's parish	103 (29%)	219 (62%)	23 (7%)	10

QUESTIONS	A	B	C	No
17. Rarely or never volunteering one's time to help out at church or for other good causes	63 (18%)	234 (66%)	49 (14%)	8
18. Abusing food, alcohol, drugs	239 (67%)	96 (27%)	13 (4%)	7
19. Racism	311 (88%)	32 (9%)	6 (2%)	6
20. Greed	254 (71.5%)	74 (21%)	9 (2.5%)	18
21. Voting for a pro-choice politician because he/she is pro-choice	180 (51%)	91(26%)	55 (16%)	29
22. Voting for a pro-choice politician because I like his position on issues, while disagreeing with his/her pro-choice stance	97 (27%)	112 (32%)	118 (33%)	28
23. Abortion	309 (87%)	14 (4%)	15 (4%)	17
24. Embryonic stem cell research	176 (50%)	77 (22%)	63 (18%)	39
25. Remaining silent when injustice is occurring in a work situation	151 (43%)	167 (47%)	18 (5%)	19
26. Failing to pay a fair wage	180 (51%)	134 (38%)	20 (6%)	21
27. Failing to do an honest day's work for a fair wage	170 (48%)	140 (40%)	23 (7%)	22
28. Dishonest and unjust business practices	262 (74%)	66 (19%)	8 (2%)	19
29. Workaholism	45 (13%)	206 (58%)	79 (22%)	25
30. Paying no attention to environmental issues, e.g., recycling	71 (20%)	195 (55%)	69 (20%)	20

7. What are some serious sins not mentioned above?

Responses: 160: Two most common: murder and lying. Other responses: suicide, assisted suicide, vandalism, the seven capital sins, jealousy, capital punishment. Many named sins that are mentioned above, e.g., adultery, emotional abuse of others, stealing.

QUESTIONS ON THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

1. I usually celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation weekly (12); monthly (18); once/twice a year (193); hardly ever (75).

2. I go to reconciliation because:

223 responses: I need to be forgiven and I feel better afterwards; its required; guilt, it's a cleansing experience; Mom makes me; to receive God's grace; to get close to God; peace.

3. I rarely or never go to reconciliation because:

282 responses:

I believe sin is something between God and me. (103) agree
I feel awkward/embarrassed telling my sins to another.

(130) agree.

I fear what the priest might say to me or think of me.

(44) agree.

I commit very few sins. (128) agree

I am confused about sin. (12) agree

I have had a bad experience with confession in the past.

(12) agree

Sample of other responses: the time issue was mentioned over and over; busy schedule; confession at inconvenient time; don't feel a need for it; "I reconcile with God daily."

4. I would go to reconciliation more often if more opportunities were offered. Total responses: 278

Agree 157, Disagree 121,

The other most suitable times mentioned were: before or after Mass; weekday evenings.

5. Normally, I do not go to reconciliation; but if the Church had a Penance service with general absolution, I would go. Responses 281: Agree 237, Disagree 44

My Comments

1. I prepared the survey questions rather quickly and did not consult others. If doing another survey, I would consult other staff members and some parishioners concerning the questions.

2. When it comes to sin, the best definition of sin is a *relational* one. Sin is anything that diminishes or hurts our relationship with others or self. Sin is our failure to live the Great Commandment of love (Mt 22:34-40). In the past, definitions of sin were too often *legalistic*.

3. Lack of awareness of *sins of omission*. In the Confiteor, we say: "I confess to almighty God... for *what I have done* (sins of commission) and for *what I have failed to do* (sins

of omission).” It has been said that for people who come to church regularly and try to be good people, their main sins will be sins of omission. If we only examine our conscience in the light of the wrongs that we may have done, we may not have much of a reason to go to reconciliation. When people say to me: “it has been six months since my last confession, I haven’t really done anything wrong,” I sometimes respond: “Great. What about sins of omission? What about some good things you could have done? Do you do any volunteer service?”

4. **Examination of conscience.** Most people mentioned the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments will always be a good guide, but for Christians they do not go far enough. We ought to also look at Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5, 6, 7).

5. The survey named 30 actions which parishioners were invited to judge as (A) seriously wrong, (B) wrong but not serious, or (C) not wrong or sinful. As we look at this part of the survey, I think all of us will be surprised if not shocked by the number of “C” responses. A “C” response denotes the respondent’s belief that the particular action is not sinful. For example, I was very surprised at the number of “C” responses to the first three statements. It is hard to believe that so many of the respondents did not think that it was wrong not to pray regularly and not to seek God’s direction on important decisions. If Jesus prayed frequently, surely we, his disciples, should also. If seeking God’s will was most important for Jesus, surely it should be for us. One could in good conscience give a “C” response to statement #22.

6. With regards to *See Statement #4*, sadly many Catholics, if not the vast majority, go through life with a grade school understanding of their faith. No wonder so many Catholics are defenseless when challenged by non-Catholics as to why we have certain beliefs, especially those beliefs not explicitly stated in the Bible. As a 61-year old priest, I am still growing in my understanding of our Catholic faith. Such growth in understanding is exciting for me. Ideally, every Catholic should be a *lifelong learner* or student of the faith. The articles I have been writing on the *Catechism* is one attempt to help Catholics grow in their understanding of the faith. If any of you would like to engage in some self-study, please contact the parish office.

Reconciliation questions

Over a third of the respondents stated that they believe that sin is a private matter between them and God; hence, one of the reasons they do not go to reconciliation. It is always amazing to me how many Catholics believe that their sin is only a “God-and-me” thing versus a “God-and –me-and-community” thing. When one choir member is silent or singing off-key, the performance is less than it could be. When any member of the Body of Christ is less than he or she could be, the light of Christ in the community is diminished in some way. Sin may sometimes be private, but our failure always has a negative ripple effect on the community we belong to.

While 157 respondents stated that they would go to reconciliation more often if more opportunities were provided, 121 stated that they would not, which means that a large number of Catholics either do not believe in the sacrament of reconciliation or have a strong resistance to going. I agree that we need to offer more opportunities for people to receive the sacrament. When we had confession after Mass on the fourth Sunday of Advent, large numbers of people came.

Rite 3, general absolution. The Church can celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation in three ways:

Rite 1, private confession to a priest like we have on Saturday afternoon.

Rite 2, private confession within the context of a communal penance service, like we have in Advent and Lent.

Rite 3, a communal penance service with general absolution—only celebrated when a large number of people show up and an insufficient number of priests are available to hear confessions. This form is rarely used.

In my opinion, this is very regrettable. As the survey shows, large numbers of Catholics who do not come to private reconciliation, would come to the sacrament if celebrated with general absolution. Because of the limits on the use of Rite 3, large numbers of Catholics never or rarely receive the sacrament. I am a big proponent of one-on-one confession and I go regularly myself, but I don’t understand why our Church leaders do not make a pastoral provision for the huge numbers of Catholics who never go to the sacrament.

Five questions about sin and reconciliation

1. How often should one celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation?

Strictly speaking, one only has to go to confession when one has committed a mortal sin. But the Church recommends a more frequent use of the sacrament. Automobile engines run more smoothly if they have a regular tune-up, and teeth stay healthier if they are cleansed regularly by a dental hygienist. In a similar way, our spiritual lives are enhanced by the frequent use of the sacrament of reconciliation.

2. Is there an unforgivable sin?

Mk 3:28-29 implies that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an unforgivable sin. The only unforgivable sin is the sin we are not sorry for. If we are not sorry for a particular sin, God cannot forgive us.

3. Why do so few Catholics go to the sacrament of reconciliation today?

Loss of the sense of sin is widespread in our culture today. People can be mean and nasty to others and think they have not done wrong. Many Catholics believe that sin is a private matter between God and them. Some are fearful of the sacrament. Many Catholics who have not gone to the sacrament for years have a strong resistance to returning. Finally, priests are partially to blame because of failure to

preach about sin, to stress the value of confession and to offer more opportunities for people to celebrate the sacrament.

4. Do you have any suggestions for those of us who seem to confess the same sins over and over?

If we confess the same sins repeatedly, we may have to take a deeper look at *how* we examine our conscience. Perhaps our examination of conscience is very narrow and superficial. Do we ever examine our conscience in the light of Scripture, especially passages like Mt 5, 6 and 7, or in the light of the good that we could have done (sins of omissions)? As for dealing with a recurring or habitual sin, here are five suggestions.

1. Begin each day by admitting you are powerless in dealing with your particular area of weakness. Pray, "Jesus, I admit my total weakness or addiction to this sin (name it). But I also believe that you can help me to overcome this sin. Please help me to do so *today*."

2. As you go through the day, be aware that you are engaged in a spiritual battle and Jesus is on your side. Be determined to avoid whatever leads you into the occasion of committing this sin.

3. At night, do a brief examination of conscience. For the successes, say: "Thank you, Lord." For your failures, say an act of contrition and then resolve to fight the battle again tomorrow.

4. Go to the sacrament of reconciliation regularly until you experience victory in this area of weakness and, ideally, go to the same priest who can counsel and encourage you.

5. Do some appropriate form of fasting which will train your spiritual muscles to say "no" to a sinful habit.

The main reason we repeat some sins over and over is because we never get serious about eliminating them. If we commit ourselves to acting on the above five suggestions, we will be surprised at how quickly we may experience victory over an area of weakness.

5. Do you have a suggestion for a way to examine our conscience?

Several areas to look at would be:

- *Relationship with God.* Am I faithful to prayer? Do I believe that God deserves one of the 96-fifteen minute periods in every day?
- *Family relationships.* Do I work hard at creating a loving environment within my family? How easy or hard is it for me to say, "I am sorry, please forgive me." If I have children at home, do I seek to raise them in the ways of Jesus and his Church?
- *Church.* Am I faithful to Sunday Mass and seeking to be an active participant at Mass, a hospitable and praying presence? To what extent do I share some of my time,

treasure and talent with my Church family and/or the wider community? Needless to say, this is an area that varies from person to person. The person working two jobs, 60 or 70 hours a week, will not be in a good position to volunteer.

- *Workplace.* What kind of presence do I bring to the workplace? Am I caring and just in my relationships with my co-workers? As an employer, do I pay a fair wage? As an employee, do I do an honest day's work?

Other questions: In general, do I see myself as an owner or steward of all I possess? Do I have any concern for the big issues of our day, e.g. world hunger, abortion, war?

A big thank you to *Jason and Christy Stowers*, new parishioners who did a tremendous and wonderful job at collating the survey responses. A big thank you to the other ladies who also worked on the survey.

Conversation on survey. On Wednesday, March 11, at 7PM in room 313 of the Ministry Center, I will facilitate a conversation on the results of the survey. Be sure to bring this column and your questions and comments.

Have a blessed week,

