Bless me, Father, for I have sinned

Where did it all start? Is it a Church invention?

The Church's role in the forgiveness of sins is based on the very words of the Lord to Peter and on a separate occasion to the Apostles: "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Jesus confirmed this gift as one of the first fruits of His Resurrection. Following the Crucifixion, the Apostles were locked in the upper room filled with fear, confusion and doubt. Suddenly, on the evening of the Resurrection, Jesus appeared in their midst with the greeting, "Peace be with you." Jesus offered them His peace, forgiveness and reconciliation and then, the grace and ability to pass this gift along: "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church cites five names given to the sacrament:

• Sacrament of conversion

• Sacrament of Penance

• Sacrament of confession

• Sacrament of forgiveness

• Sacrament of Reconciliation

(Note the capitalization of Penance and Reconciliation indicates the formal, more appropriate designations). Each of these names highlights a different aspect of the sacrament.

Through the centuries, the form in which the Church exercised this commission of the Lord has evolved, as has the practice of the faithful in celebrating this unique gift from Christ; older generations will recall the day that individuals would receive Holy Communion on Sunday only if he or she had gone to confession the Saturday before. How the pendulum has swung!

It comes as news to no one that there has been a serious decline in individuals going to confession. Is there little urgency to confess, because there is confusion or even denial in some quarters on the very existence of mortal sin as well as the existence of hell? Unfortunately, yes. The Catechism is so very valuable in clarifying Church teaching in matters such as this and should be studied at home, taught in schools and preached from our pulpits.

All the faithful who are aware of serious sins committed are required to confess at least once a year and Holy Communion should not be received without the confession of serious sin.

All the sacraments, as "God's Masterpieces," are the precious heritage of the Church and no individual has the right to add, omit, or alter anything in them by one's own authority. Individual confession to a priest is essential to the sacrament and only in most unusual circumstances – and with the bishop's permission – is "general absolution" permitted.

Fortunately, Lent is here, offering many occasions to preach and teach the sacrament of Penance. Where the preaching and teaching occurs the subsequent rise in the reception of the sacrament is remarkable.

I hope to discuss with our Presbyteral Council what more we might do in the months ahead to make our good people aware of this gift of God's forgiveness that awaits them. Meanwhile, some arresting, if not shocking statistics from a 2005 CARA (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate) survey:

• When asked how often they go to confession, 42 percent of Catholic adults stated, "Never"!

• Of the remainder, 32 percent of adult Catholics admitted to going to confession less than once a year.

These people miss the grace of God's love, offered so fully, so freely in the sacrament of Reconciliation. God seeks to draw each of us closer to Him, and this great gift allows us to do just that and to hear His words of forgiveness.

Do you know what time weekly confessions are scheduled in your parish?

To search for a parish near you offering confession at a specific day and time, visit www.archbalt.org/parishes/confession-search.cfm.