

Catholics turn out for confession and reconciliation

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Mike Mandella opened the doors to the mostly darkened church and immediately looked in the direction of pools of bright light that spilled onto the floor from the two open reconciliation rooms.

It had been 28 years since his last confession and Mr. Mandella was one of the first to show up at St. Joseph in Sykesville March 4 to receive the sacrament on a bitter Wednesday evening.

After confessing his sins and receiving absolution, Mr. Mandella clutched a rosary and knelt in silent prayer in the church.

"It was very humbling and very fulfilling," Mr. Mandella told The Catholic Review. "It's such a great relief. I feel so much better."

The St. Joseph parishioner was one of many Catholics throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore who received the Sacrament of Reconciliation on the first night of an archdiocesan campaign called "The light is on for you."

Priests were present to hear confessions at every parish in the archdiocese from 7-8:30 p.m. They will do it again every Wednesday in Lent.

Whether parishes received just a handful of penitents or numbers that topped 50, pastors reported that the campaign has succeeded in welcoming many people back into the full sacramental life of the church.

At St. Louis in Clarksville, seven people were already in line to receive the sacrament when Monsignor Joseph Luca arrived at 7 p.m. He and another priest heard more than 50 confessions, keeping the church open an hour longer than scheduled.

"I was very touched by the quality of the individual confessions and their sincerity," said Monsignor Luca, pastor. "They were genuinely interested in renewing their relationship with the Lord. Some had been away for 30 years."

Father Christopher Whatley, pastor of St. Mark in Catonsville, noted that the heartfelt confession of one of the 33 people who came to his parish had a particularly deep impact on him.

"I would do the entire campaign for the whole of Lent for one confession I heard last night," Father Whatley said. "Because of this program, after many years of alienation from the church and being disconnected, this person came back into the peace of Christ."

The priest called reconciliation "one of the most remarkable treasures of our faith."

Father Carl F. Cummings, pastor of St. Agnes in Catonsville, agreed.

"I consider the Eucharist and confession the two most important things in my priestly ministry," he said. "It is awe-inspiring to be a vehicle for reconciliation between God and the sinner."

Two dozen people went into the confessionals at St. Mary in Hagerstown. Those waiting their turn prayed the Way of the Cross in the church.

"It was very heartening and inspiring as a priest to see so many people come out," said Father J. Collin Poston, administrator. "I look forward to being there for more people who want to receive reconciliation in the weeks ahead."

Jesuit Father Joseph Lacey, pastor of St. Alphonsus Rodriguez in Woodstock, noted that one man arrived 45 minutes before Mass on Ash Wednesday to go to confession. Even though he was a week early, Father Lacey gladly heard his confession and heard several more on the campaign's official start date.

"Even if we don't get a big turnout, at least they know we're there for them," he said. "We think it's that important."

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien, who heard confessions at the Church of the Ascension

in Halethorpe, said he was encouraged by the positive response to the campaign. He expects even more people to come forward as Easter approaches.

“The more opportunities we can offer for reconciliation, the better,” he said. “It’s just been a neglected sacrament for too long. People have to be informed and encouraged and motivated, and wherever that’s happened, we find a renewal of the sacrament.”

The archdiocese has promoted the campaign by purchasing ads in several newspapers from Western Maryland’s Oakland to Baltimore. Commercials have been in regular rotation on radio and television, and there have been advertisements on billboards and on the sides of Baltimore MTA buses.

Liza Lemaster, a 39-year-old parishioner of St. Joseph in Sykesville and her 8-year-old son, John, both received the sacrament at their parish.

“It’s good to know there’s forgiveness and you can start anew,” Ms. Lemaster said.

For those still fearful of the sacrament, Monsignor John Dietzenbach of St. Peter the Apostle in Libertytown recommended they trust in God’s mercy.

“I’d say, just go and do it,” said Monsignor Dietzenbach, who heard four confessions on the first night of the campaign. “They’ll be surprised how welcome they’d be. They are never judged. We want to celebrate with them and get them in the right relationship with God.”

Paul McMullen and Matt Palmer contributed to this story.