

Let a Little Light Shine on You

“God loves us just the way we are.

But he loves us too much to leave us that way.”

Perhaps you will be hearing these words in one of the several radio and television spots that will be airing during these weeks of Lent. We have recorded these spots, thanks to your generosity to our annual Catholic Communications collection. The Lenten campaign is called “The Light is on for You” and encourages Catholics of the Archdiocese to make a good Confession as part of their Lenten practices this year. Indeed, the Church has long considered Lent as the season for repentance and reconciliation.

A current book by James O’Toole, “The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America,” notes any number of Catholic trends in our country over the years. Since the end of Vatican Council II, for example, there has been a steady rise in the reception of Holy Communion. In 1963, some 29 percent of Catholics who attended Mass would receive Communion. In 1979, the rate climbed to more than 50 percent, and present day, I would venture a guess that the number is over 80 percent.

That’s very good news ... if those who come to the altar are properly disposed: that is, primarily, free from grave sin.

Alas, similar studies also indicate, as any pastor will confirm, a corresponding precipitous drop off in the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (also called Confession or Penance). As an example, in 1965, 38 percent of all American Catholics went to Confession at least monthly. Ten years later, that number was halved to 17 percent. Another 10 years, 1985, and among Catholics actively involved in parish life – 26 percent said they never went to Confession, 35 percent confessed once a year at most, and only 6 percent said they went monthly. The numbers are considerably more discouraging today: I recently read that only 11 percent of Catholics confess once a year or more!

The causes? No doubt, there is an apparent generational divide in the thinking of Catholics about the existence of, and damage caused by sin. It is not unusual to hear

a Catholic say, "I never hear a homily about sin. Is there still such a thing as mortal sin?" To which the Church responds, "There certainly is!" See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1854-1864, for example.

This would suggest the need for a serious catechesis on the reality of sin (as if any one of us would have to be convinced!). Also in order would be the restoration of the sense of what John Paul II called "Eucharistic awe" – amazement when faced with the divine reality of the Eucharist and with it, the serious responsibility one takes in approaching the altar. St. Paul's admonition is as relevant today as ever: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. ... For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor. 11:27,29). Seemingly, there is a close relationship between the failure to appreciate the mystery of the Eucharist and the need to approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

And so, if all goes as planned, every parish church will have a confessional light on every Wednesday evening during the next five weeks of Lent from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. And the light is on for each of you. (See the accompanying article in this edition of the Review for further details.)

Regardless of the years away from the Sacrament, or the gravity of the sins to be confessed, even though you have forgotten how to start a Confession or to recite an Act of Contrition, an understanding priest will be on hand to help you along and to conclude your full Confession with the words that Christ will speak through him: "I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Go in peace." Our parishes have helpful brochures to similarly guide you through every step – from the preparation and examination of conscience to the act of making a good confession. It further seeks to dispel negative myths and stereotypes about the Sacrament by reassuring the faithful that Reconciliation "is more about God's mercy than about our sinfulness. Recognizing our sinfulness is only the first step in allowing God to offer forgiveness and to love us even more."

Negligent in religious duties toward God? Judgmental, unkind toward others? Unfaithful to sacred promises? Impurity in mind or body? Clear out all the soul-cluttering rubbish in a Lenten spring-cleaning.

The light will be on for you!

For more information about The Light is on for You, including a listing of Catholic parishes in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, visit www.archbalt.org.