

Quirky Catholic: Confession line etiquette

I am a bit of a confession floater, due to frequent moves and preferring to avoid the priests I know the best. Is that wrong? After attending many churches for confession, I wonder what the deal with confession line etiquette is. If the person in front of you goes in, does everyone move up? Is there a designated distance between the confessional and someone standing in the confession line, especially in old, poorly soundproofed confessionals? What about two lines, one going slow and one moving fast? Do you allow for crossovers?

While attending The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., I used to attend confession at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, and it had an interesting (to be honest, confusing) arrangements for confessions: four confessionals, one in each corner of the room, and two pews facing each other. It was great for one priest, one line for one confessional, until another priest came in. Do you start another line, but by doing so, cutoff the other people waiting in the first line? Mayhem would breakout when a third priest came in, three confessionals and two lines. I saw verbal arguments erupt.



(Chapel of Our Lady of Hostyn at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception)

I thought about writing a letter asking to put up better signage, but I realized it was kind of a test. If you are yelling in the confessional line, you probably are not contrite for your sins. I remember adding sins while in line: impatient, bad thoughts. Maybe, I was stuck in the “slow line” because God wanted me to examine my conscience a little longer.

I love confession, but I know some people are nervous about going. There might be more pressing issues facing the church, but we could make it easier for these people and everyone else with a few improvements:

More than just Saturday afternoon

Every church has confessions on Saturday afternoon. It was great when I was single and childless, but with children, every Saturday quickly fills up. I know it is about priorities, but it is hard to skip out on family events, leaving my wife with all the children. If the Lenten practice of having confession on weeknight was made permanent, it would be a godsend. Or as some parishes do, churches could institute confession in between Sunday Masses. What better time to offer confession than before Mass?

Better signage

This improvement is a no brainer. Put up a sign explaining the customs of the church. Start the line here, move forward at the appropriate time, and so on. Furthermore, keep a stack of pamphlets with an examination of conscience and instructions for going to confession. These simple fixtures could be reassuring for someone returning to the sacrament after a long absence.

One line

There two schools of thought: one line for each priest or one line total. I am a big fan of a single line. It avoids the confusion when priest leave or come, but it also mitigates the slow line / fast line dynamic. You cannot pick your priest, but I am okay with that.

Soundproof

Almost 5,000 years ago, humans built the Great Pyramids, but today we still have problems soundproofing a confessional. There have been notable improvements recently, and I appreciate them. We are confessing our sins to the priest, not to the whole congregation.

Go!!!

Most of this blog entry is in jest, but I want to conclude with one serious point. If you're on the fence about returning to confession, go. It is truly a wonderful experience. You leave feeling like a weight had been lifted off you, the shackles of sin broken.

I am always hesitant before going, but one time, I noticed that everyone leaving the confessional had the biggest smile. When I went in, I started with a smaller offense. I like to work my way up to the big stuff. The priest laughed a bit, and said something to the effect, "Sounds like me and my siblings." All of sudden, I eased, and was reminded that everyone is a sinner. I thought: hey, I can out do that one. I have a whole list. I also left the confessional with a big smile.

There has been a good deal of discussion about mercy. Mercy is not accepting people as they are. Mercy is the reduction of just punishment, and it begins when we repent of our sinful ways and promise to live better in the future. In other word, mercy begins with confession.

"If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow: and if they be red as crimson, they shall be white as wool." Isaiah 1:18