

Successful confessions campaign returns for second year

In popular culture, the sacrament of reconciliation can often be portrayed as intimidating. Some who are seeking to lighten the heavy burden of sin are often scared away from the confessional.

Once again, however, the Archdiocese of Baltimore is offering hope during Lent for those who have strayed from the sacrament.

For the second year in a row, the archdiocese is sponsoring an advertising campaign called "The Light is for You," which is similar to a campaign first initiated in the Archdiocese of Washington. It uses billboards, bus, Internet and TV ads to encourage Catholics to reconnect with the sacrament during Lent's 40 days, beginning Feb. 17 with Ash Wednesday.

When it debuted in Baltimore during 2009, "The Light is on for You" campaign brought more than 8,000 people to confessionals.

According to the archdiocese, recent statistics indicate that approximately 11 percent of Catholics go to confession once a year or more. Thirty-eight percent of all American Catholics went to confession at least once a month in 1965, the archdiocese said.

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien announced the return of the initiative in late January.

"The church needs to do a better job of educating our people about the spiritual benefits offered by the sacrament of reconciliation, as well as the direct connection between reconciliation and the reception of the Eucharist," Archbishop O'Brien said in a news release.

Many of the 8,000 people who took advantage of the "The Light is on for You" had not been to confessions for years.

Unlike last year when every parish in the archdiocese had priests hearing

confessions from 7-8:30 p.m., parishes will set their own preferred time each Wednesday in Lent this year.

Monsignor James M. Barker, pastor of St. Ignatius in Hickory, hears confessions on first Fridays of the month and on Saturdays. During Lent and Advent, reconciliation is available even more frequently.

He said the connection between a priest and a person coming to confession is powerful. For those contemplating returning, he offered advice.

"I would say to trust their priest," Monsignor Barker said. "We're there in the Lord's name and in the church's name. Most of the hard work is already done. Going to confession is a process of conversion. The priest is basically going to open his arms and extend the Lord's mercy and the church's mercy. By this point, you've figured out how to right your life."

Last Lent, St. Ignatius averaged 30 to 40 people each Wednesday. Monsignor Barker said the Wednesday evening confessions were welcomed by people with busy schedules.

"They were good confessions," Monsignor Barker said. "They really wanted to sit down and open their hearts to the Lord. They wanted a sense of grace."

Archbishop O'Brien is filled with optimism about the project.

"We are also hopeful that this initiative will lead people who have been away from the sacrament not only back to the confessional, but also back to the pews," Archbishop O'Brien said. "We hope it helps them to deepen their faith, while also knocking down some of the myths and stereotypes associated with confession."

For more information about "The Light is on for You," contact a parish near you. Visit www.archbalt.org for a listing of parishes and for more information about the program.