Confession still good for the soul

Allentown Catholic Diocese focuses on a sense of sin -- and forgiveness -- during Lent.

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Every Catholic knows the phrase, even if plenty of them haven't uttered it in a couple of decades or so.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned…"

Confession. Or, if you prefer, reconciliation. It's the sacrament in which believers bare their souls and sins to a priest who grants them absolution in the name of Christ.

Though it is rooted in Christ's commission to his apostles -- "Whose sins you forgive shall be forgiven them" -- it's one of the most neglected elements of Catholic life. After all, it's intimidating to utter one's failures out loud, even to someone behind a screen.

Not that screens are necessarily part of the equation anymore. Indeed, if Allentown Bishop John Barres's Lenten push to get people back to confession succeeds, a lot of long-time evaders might be surprised at the state of the sacrament nowadays.

The option of anonymous confession remains but the traditional velvet-curtained confessional has been supplanted in many churches by the "reconciliation room" where the penitent can sit face-to-face with the priest.

And post-confession penance -- traditionally Our Fathers and Hail Marys -- is now just as likely to take the form of a good deed or a general meditation.

The Rev. Andrew Baker, pastor of the Cathedral of St. Catharine of Siena in Allentown, said Barres launched the confession initiative -- called "Encountering the Merciful Savior" -- this month to rekindle the sense of sin in Catholics who have not heard that topic addressed as forcefully as it used to be from the Sunday pulpit.

"It was Pope Pius XII who once said the greatest sin of the 20th century is the lack of the sense of sin. And that's continued in the 21st," said Baker, whose church -- along with all others in the five-county diocese -- has added two hours a week to the confession schedule through the 40 days of Lent.

Priests were also asked to preach about sin during Masses on the first Sunday of Lent, the penitential season leading to Easter. And the diocese is airing radio commercials on the initiative.

Baker said he's already noted an uptick in confessions at the cathedral since the initiative began, with some people telling him they had come specifically because of his homily on sin.
He said would-be penitents can rest assured priests will treat them compassionately and guide them through the fundamentals of the sacrament if they are rusty. And to Catholics reluctant to return to confession because they fall into the same sins over and over, he offers assurance.

"I always say 'I do the same thing. My greatest faults and sins can be very regular and I'm struggling just like you are.'"

Acknowledging sin and repenting of it is universal in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In Judaism, the holiest day of the year is Yom Kippur, which centers on atonement and repentance. In many branches of Protestantism, salvation is a once-and-done thing: repent, accept Christ as your savior and be saved forever.

Catholicism, however, teaches that believers forfeit salvation if they die outside the "state of grace" obtained through sacramental absolution. So every serious fall must be followed by confession and contrition.

As no one outside the state of grace is supposed to receive communion, the phenomenon of empty confessionalss and lengthy communion lines at Sunday Mass suggests many Catholics have undergone a shift in their understanding of what is commonly called mortal sin, the kind that excludes a soul from God's grace.

The Rev. Thomas Dailey, director of the Salesian Center for Faith and Culture at DeSales University in Center Valley, said that shift is rooted in a changed emphasis on the "fundamental option." The phrase refers to a moral theory that focuses on a person's orientation for or against God.

According to some theologians, "as long as your fundamental option remains a choice for God, nothing that one does fundamentally alters that," Dailey said. The church discredits that notion because it suggests no action is a mortal sin unless the person's fundamental option is the rejection of God.

"In some people's mindsÂ…who one is and what one does are separate things," said Dailey, adding that much of Pope John Paul II's philosophy and theology "was an attempt to show how those things, while admittedly distinct, cannot be completely separated."

"The connection between who we are and how we act -- trying to restore that is essential."

Granted, there are other reasons confession lines are short.

"It may be past experiences with the sacrament that would not have been a positive experience, so people think 'Why return to that?'" Dailey said. "And I think culturally there's the broader notion of self-esteem and the 'I'm OK, you're OK' generation that makes everything OK. I think people retain a sense of right and wrong but not the sense of how that wrong affects a relationship with God. That's the sin part."