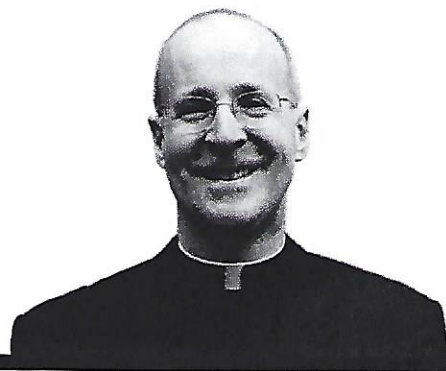


Hate confession?

Rediscovering the appeal of the sacrament

By James Martin



I have a Catholic friend who hates confession. I am not going to break any confidences, but my friend despises confession so much that he hasn't gone for a decade. He has offered several reasons why he doesn't go to what is formally called the sacrament of reconciliation: He is afraid that his sins are now too much to confess all at once; he is frightened of what the priest might say (he's had a few bad experiences); and he is too busy.

My friend is not the only person I've met who feels this way. Several years ago, while directing a retreat, I met a woman who said that she hadn't gone to confession for 20 years. Her reason was also an unpleasant experience with a priest during the sacrament. As I recall, he berated her for not coming in more frequently.

In response, I asked her: "If you had a bad experience with a physician, would you would never see a physician again?" But even after we talked about her experiences, she was hesitant to return. Our spiritual direction session was brief, and by the time our 20 minutes was up it was time for another retreatant. So I have no idea if she ever returned to the confessional.

Sometimes I feel nearly tongue-tied in these situations. Not because I judge people in these situations to be bad Catholics, or because I don't know any helpful responses to these common roadblocks. Rather, it's because I go to confession frequently.

Very frequently. And I like it.

Admittedly, it's easier for me to do when I live in a house filled with priests, and especially when my spiritual director is a member of my community. If I ever feel burdened by sin, or even a sin, all I need to do is knock on someone's door and ask.

On the other hand, it's arguably harder, since these are men with whom I live and, in many instances, work. After confessing your sins to someone, you may see the fellow at breakfast the next morning or at an editorial meeting. But that has never bothered me, because I figure that anyone who lives or works with me already knows I am not perfect.

I often ponder what makes me more inclined to go to confession than the people I mentioned. I am certainly not any holier than anyone else—not by a long shot. It's not that I have fewer sins.

Maybe it's the frequency. I go to confession once a month, if not more. So I'm used to it. Consequently, it ceases to hold any conceivable fear. My situation is something like that of a person who has a fear of flying taking 50 flights in one year, and then suddenly realizing that he's comfortable on a plane. He knows there will inevitably be turbulence and can say, "I'm used to this. And it is not as bad as I thought it would be."

Sometimes I tell skittish Catholics how wonderful it feels to be honest

with God in the sacrament. The old argument against confession that you can always tell God your sins is a good one. Of course you can. But often you don't. Moreover, it helps to verbalize your sins with another person. And hearing the words of absolution, *viva voce*, is a lot more powerful than intuiting them in prayer. At least for me.

My comfort level may also stem from experiences with confession from the other side. When hearing confessions, and offering absolution, I can see how people feel unburdened. They exhale. They relax. They smile. And I can feel how grateful they are to be forgiven for something they thought was unforgivable. All that makes confession precious to me.

But mainly I like the way I feel afterward, as if God had given me another chance—which, of course, God has. And no matter if I'm hearing confessions or going to confession, I always think of what my theology professor, Peter Fink, S.J., once told our class: "Confession isn't about how bad you are, but how good God is."

I wish I could invite everyone who has stayed away to come back. And for returnees, I hope you hear some form of what I say to people who haven't been to confession for years: "Welcome back."

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