



Our Lady of the Lake Catholic Church

What is a “Penitential Service”?

At this point in our history there are three forms for the rite of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Roman Catholic faith. The first is the one we are acquainted with on a typical Saturday afternoon with private preparation and individual confession and absolution with the priest. The second has communal preparation and dismissal with individual confession and absolution in the middle. The third has communal preparation with general confession and absolution. It seems to be the judgment of the Church that although this third form is not intended for a life or death “emergency situation,” that it is only intended for “grave situations” which have never been quite defined. It has been made clear, though, that the number of people interested in the sacrament immediately prior to Christmas and Easter is NOT one of those “grave situations.”

However, “in addition to the sacramental forms of reconciliation, non-sacramental, communal penance services should be afforded to the faithful several times during the year.” Such are the communal penitential services scheduled before Christmas and Easter. So, if it is not the sacrament of Reconciliation what is it? I think that it could legitimately be thought of as an elaboration of the penitential rite that we have at the beginning of nearly every Mass. We “call to mind our sins” and then the priest says “May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and lead us to everlasting life.” On the one hand it is not the sacrament of Reconciliation, but on the other hand the Church would not require that we routinely go through an exercise that was hollow and without effect. So when would a non-sacramental communal service be appropriate? Well, first of all it would not be appropriate for those whose sins have completely cut them off from God or the Church. In that situation only sacramental Reconciliation is an appropriate reintegration into the Church. However, a non-sacramental service of reconciliation might be very appropriate for those, who while living lives of grace, know that they have sinned and want to take a serious opportunity to reflect on their sinfulness and God’s mercy prior to one of the great feasts of our faith. If you are reading this after attending a Mass at which you were able to receive communion this definitely means YOU. There is no reason why a person could not take the opportunity for both private confession AND a communal penitential service as spiritual preparation for Christmas or Easter.

We will always offer a number of extra opportunities for private sacramental confession in the week before Christmas and Easter as well. Please remember, though, that I will only have so much time available myself in that last week. If you have already gone to confession earlier in Advent or Lent and wish to go again, I would ask that in consideration for others that you go at the end of the line so that those for whom the special hours are the only ones possible have the best chance to celebrate the sacrament.

Fr. Charlie Hall