

Focus groups share experiences of Sacrament of Reconciliation as part of study

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

Focus groups in the diocese of Saskatoon recently shared their experiences, understanding and hopes for the sacrament of reconciliation as part of a study requested by Bishop Albert LeGatt.

Sr. Teresita Kambeitz, OSU, and Fr. George Smith, CSB, led the study which involved 53 people in four faith communities across the diocese: Martensville, Pilger, Unity, and St. Thomas More in Saskatoon.

In each focus group, participants were asked to reflect in a general way on their experience of celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation, to reflect on specific positive and negative experiences, and to suggest ways of moving towards a more authentic celebration of the sacrament.

Four recurring themes clearly emerged at all four focus groups, according to the report which Kambeitz and Smith recently presented to the bishop: a need to heal painful memories of "going to confession," a need for continuing education and formation of priests and penitents in the theology of reconciliation, the importance of the priest's role in the sacrament, and the desire to experience meaningful counseling in the celebration of the sacrament.

Many participants recounted experiences of the sacrament "in less than ideal terms," said the report, adding that some expressed a need to be healed of painful memories in order to move towards a more authentic celebration of the sacrament in the future.

"This was (a) clear desire to experience, perhaps liturgically, God's healing touch which might liberate them from the memories of those occasions when the sacrament was not an experience of God's healing mercy."

Continuing education of both penitents and priests was identified as essential, in a recurring theme in all the focus groups. "In general participants feel that their lack of understanding of sacramental theology impedes them from celebrating the sacrament fully," the report said. In addition, the priest must have an understanding "of where the penitent is on his or her journey of life" for the experience of the sacrament to be fruitful.

"Among the most moving experiences described frequently by participants were those stories of gentle, compassionate priests whose profound pastoral and spiritual sensitivity allowed participants to truly experience the richness of God's mercy. At the same time participants were conscious of the circumstances which can sometimes make it difficult for priests to be effective ministers of God's mercy ... All were conscious of the heavy demands placed on priests in ministry today," said the report.

"What must be stressed is the extent to which the personal manner of the priest, as he welcomes the penitent, is crucial to the fruitful celebration of the sacrament. A warm attentive welcome, with eye contact, communicating joy and hope, were all seen as elements of the personal manner that penitents appreciate."

A deep desire for meaningful counseling was another recurring theme among the focus groups, according to the report. "In many cases, one might form the impression that the counseling was as important as the sacramental experience of God's healing mercy." The report suggested that both priests and penitents might need to be reminded that sometimes spiritual counseling is best offered outside the sacrament of reconciliation, and priests must also be aware of occasions when it is appropriate to guide penitents to counselors with particular expertise.

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People hungry for authentic experience of God's healing through Reconciliation

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

Listening to people of the diocese reflect on the sacrament of reconciliation, Sr. Teresita Kambeitz and Fr. George Smith, CSB, heard a call for a more adult and authentic experience of the sacrament.

"Some people had outgrown the method of going to confession that they learned when they were seven years old, but hadn't replaced it with something that matched their adult understanding of sin and reconciliation," said Kambeitz.

"It is my sense that we must find new ways to revitalize this sacrament," said Smith. "So many people are seeking to have an intimate experience of the healing touch of God."

Asked by Bishop Albert LeGatt to study the experiences and perceptions of the lay faithful about the sacrament of reconciliation, Kambeitz and Smith set up focus groups at four parishes in the diocese of Saskatoon. Their findings are contained in a report to the bishop (see related story, above) which has also been shared with the diocesan Council of Priests.

Focus group participants were eager to share their stories, "and in many cases with a fairly moving level of honesty," said Smith. "Some recalled grace-filled experiences of God's healing mercy; others experiences of pain and hurt."

A number of participants said they felt honoured that the bishop would ask for their experience, noted Kambeitz. She said the focus groups included a good cross section of attitudes – "not everyone in the groups was really keen on confession."

The need for continuing education and formation in the theology of reconciliation – for both penitents and priests – was one of the recurring themes recorded in their report. Formation that recognizes the developmental stages of learning, and the stages of faith development seems to be what is required, said Kambeitz, describing the anger and frustration of some who felt "treated like a child" when going to confession.

"Adults want another method of going to confession that isn't necessarily spiritual direction, but a method that's appropriate for an adult," she said, describing how instead of the "shopping list" of sins committed this or that many times, the penitent might instead focus on a particular problem area.

"For instance, they might say: 'my main problem is anger... I make a resolution for the next couple of months that I am going to try to overcome my anger by trying to be more grateful,'" said Kambeitz. "This wouldn't take any more time, it's just a different approach."

Bringing about a more meaningful celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation may require some formation and a bit of creativity, Kambeitz said, suggesting an in-service session for priests on faith development stages might also be helpful.