

[Opinion](#)

[News](#)

[Spirituality](#)



by NCR Staff

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December 3, 2021

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Countless Catholics on social media [have shared experiences of harm](#) by priests in the confessional booth — verbal and spiritual abuse, sexism, inappropriate conduct and out-of-touch priestly counsel. NCR readers wrote in responding to this commentary from Flora x. Tang. The letters have been edited for length and clarity.

I will never forget the traumatic confessional experience I had when I was 8-years-old growing up in rural Nebraska — "The Beef State — in 1959. It was a mortal sin to eat meat on a Friday. I had, at that time, a great deal of respect for the priest in my parish after my father's death when I was seven and I had completed my first communion.



I was at a public function that served fresh Nebraska ground beef hamburgers on a Friday night. I was unable to eat at home before attending the function because my mother was a single working mother and was unable to cook a meatless meal before the event. I was starved, the smell of grilled burgers and people encouraging me to eat a hamburger was overwhelming for an 8-year-old.

I confessed to the priest who went ballistic on me for committing a mortal sin and belittled my working mother for allowing this to happen. I was traumatized. I will never forget the experience.

I learned later in life that this same priest sexually abused an altar boy in our parish and it no longer was a sin to eat meat on Friday after the Second Vatican Council. Those two experiences taught me to always question church authority no matter what religion.

DEAN COLE

Lincoln, Nebraska

I have been an ordained priest for 35 years. I view the sacrament of reconciliation as a great privilege. I am honored that a person of faith would come to participate in a prayer that requires both courage and trust.

My role in the confessional: I am there to listen without judgment, to authentically welcome and affirm the person who seeks reconciliation, and to share with them God's absolute compassion and unconditional love.

(Fr.) GREGORY M. CORRIGAN

Wilmington, Delaware

After reading the article "What if you experience harm instead of healing in the confessional?" I felt a need to comment. While I don't intend to refute anything experienced by anyone in the article, I would like to be fair to some very good priests by offering an alternative experience.

I lived in the Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky, for eight years. During that time, and since I was involved in youth ministry, I had occasion to participate in the sacrament of reconciliation in a number of different parishes and retreat houses. The variety of locations meant a variety of priests hearing confessions, and a variety of ecclesiologies among those priests.

I would like to state that I always experienced a sensitive, pastoral minister when participating in the sacrament in that diocese. I always felt the merciful forgiveness that we should all experience when exiting the confessional.

GREGORY T. SMYTH

New York, New York

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Priests sometimes experience such violation of their faith as well. Martin Luther, reflecting as a young Augustinian on his 1511-1512 pilgrimage to Rome, found the penitentiary at St Peter's to be "without knowledge, compassion or pastoral skill."

Near 500 years later, I found the same man still in the confessional at St Peter's.

Fortunately, my community in Rome pointed me to my brother Dominicans at Maria Maggiore after I told them of the encounter.

My sin, for which I received the drubbing of the ages — it had been a month since my last confession.

I have taught the ministry of reconciliation to final year students for ministry here in South Africa. Faculty exams are not enough. The ministry of reconciliation is a skill built on a natural ability to listen with compassion. The Orthodox only give the faculty to those priests who have a proven record of pastoral skill. Maybe we should learn from them.

(Fr.) MARTIN BADENHORST, OP

Gauteng, South Africa

The well written article, "What if you experience harm instead of healing in the confessional?" does not explore the fundamentals — the evolution of the definitions of the sacraments of confession and priestly ordination.

When one reviews the scriptural basis of them, it becomes evident a kernel of truth is encased in massive manmade gobbledygook. While attending seminary, the priest-professor stated the priestly role was elevated during times of distress for the church and the priesthood.

Church leaders can define what they want, however they want, making something from nothing simply by saying it is developmental theology. It's easy enough to trace what is claimed back to sacred scripture to learn there's little or nothing there on which to base their false claim. All one needs do is go down the list of church dogma to see how much is human invention.

If the confessional does more harm than good, simply stop going. I haven't gone to confession/reconciliation in more than four decades. I pray more days than not, and include in my prayers my desire to remain reconciled with God. That meets my needs because God is understanding — if scripture is to be believed. God knows what is needed before we formulate it.

MICHAEL J. McDERMOTT

Tyler, Texas

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