

## **THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AT ST. BERNADETTE**

The Sacrament of Penance is a holy event, full of transforming grace. Sometimes its ordinary. We confess our ordinary sins, we are contrite, we are forgiven by God and we go on our way to make amends. And sometimes it is extraordinary in its capacity to receive us, hold us and transform us in moments of deep sorrow, sadness, hurt and loss. How blessed we are to share in the Sacrament of Penance in both ordinary and extraordinary moments of our faith journey.

As in all of the sacraments, the ritual for the Sacrament of Penance calls for the “imposition of hands” and the prayer for absolution. Often times, the priest will simply, if possible, rest his hand upon the head of the penitent as a sign of forgiveness and blessing. Even when the sacrament is celebrated with a screen, the priest lifts his hand in prayer and, from behind the screen, rests it symbolically on the head of the penitent. Its been part of the ritual for ages.

“Houston, we have a problem.” With the Church trying to find the right way out of the abuse scandal, touching the penitents head in blessing has become problematic and can lead to misunderstanding. The most innocent, well intended and holy gesture of touching the head can and has been interpreted as touching without consent and led, even recently in the last few months, to priests being temporarily suspended from their duties while being investigated.

In our world today, in order to protect both the penitent and the priest from misunderstanding, we have to find a better way or at least a way that diminishes the risks. One option available is simply to remove the option of sitting face to face with the priest, leaving only the possibility of kneeling behind a screen. But even in this option you have two people alone in a dark room behind a door (with a window). Another option is one that we have used for the last 50 years during both Advent and Lent. For five decades in this country the Church has celebrated the Sacrament of Penance in public with penitents standing in line, sitting in a chair before a priest or behind a priest in front of the entire Assembly. Its not a new way of celebrating the sacrament. We have been doing it for more than 50 years.

Beginning this week, this will be our regular practice for the Sacrament of Penance on Saturday. It's the most logical and pastoral choice. It will be done in a way that allows the penitent to remain anonymous if he or she chooses. It will be done in a way so that no one is able to hear the confession. There will be no touching on the head, no hugging at the end, but a simple raised hand in blessing. It will be done in public to protect both the penitent and the priest from misunderstanding. So, until another era when we are able, if we choose, to return to the traditional confessional, this will be our practice at St. Bernadette.