

2026

# CATHOLIC PULSE REPORT



*A Father,  
Not a Judge*

## “Your sins are forgiven.”

**T**hese words resound at the intersection of two fundamental desires: the desire of every human heart to receive the healing mercy of forgiveness, and the desire of God to grant this to every soul.

Indeed, as this new study, the Catholic Pulse Report, indicates: “The desire for mercy is the strongest draw to Confession.” Yet nearly 70% of Catholics, according to this study and others, have not gone to Confession in the past year.

While studies have reported decline in Catholics receiving the sacrament, this study rightly notes that “relatively little research has explored the deeper questions behind those patterns.” If we are to truly understand and begin to address this issue, we must better understand not only that this issue exists, but *why*—why are Catholics participating in the sacrament of Confession less and less?

The Catholic Pulse Report goes a long way toward shedding crucial light on this question, through rigorous research and analysis conducted with a depth not typically seen in other research. This study is dynamic, diligent, and profoundly illuminating, and includes reflections on the data that are not only informative, but pastorally useful and practical, framed in ways sensitive to different experiences and pastoral contexts.

I have no doubt that the Church will benefit greatly from not only this study, but additional studies from Vinea in the future.

**Most Rev. Kevin C. Rhoades**

Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend

“The soul does not find peace until it has **laid down its burden** at the feet of the priest. Do not be afraid; the priest is a father, not a judge.”

Archbishop Socrates Villegas, Philippines

## ABOUT THIS STUDY

Confession remains one of the Church's most powerful encounters with God's mercy, yet many Catholics participate only occasionally or not at all. This study examines how Catholics understand the sacrament today, what encourages or discourages participation, and what experiences those who receive the sacrament report most strongly. The findings reveal that disengagement is often less about rejection of the sacrament than about hesitation, uncertainty, and the absence of habit. At the same time, many Catholics remain open to returning, especially when the promise of God's mercy is clearly communicated. Together, these insights suggest that renewal of Confession may be both pastorally reachable and spiritually significant for many Catholics.

### Study Purpose

The Sacrament of Reconciliation has long held a central place in the spiritual life of the Catholic Church. Through Confession, Catholics encounter God's mercy, receive forgiveness for their sins, and are restored to a deeper relationship with God and the Church. The sacrament is also closely tied to participation in the Eucharist, as Catholics are called to approach Holy Communion in a state of grace.

At the same time, multiple studies over the past several decades have shown a substantial decline in the frequency with which Catholics participate in Confession. While these studies provide valuable information about how often Catholics go to Confession, relatively

little research has explored the deeper questions behind those patterns.

This study seeks to help fill that gap by examining how Catholics understand and experience the sacrament, including the beliefs, motivations, and obstacles that shape their participation in Confession.

In particular, this research explores questions that are rarely studied in depth, including:

- How Catholics understand sin, forgiveness, and the role of Confession in the spiritual life
- The barriers that discourage Catholics from going to Confession
- The motivations and experiences that draw Catholics toward the sacrament
- The pastoral and practical factors that influence participation in Confession
- How greater participation in Confession may contribute to spiritual renewal and engagement in the life of the Church

The goal of this study is to provide insights that can help Catholic leaders – including pastors, dioceses, apostolates, publishers, and ministry organizations – better understand how Catholics approach Confession today and how they might more effectively invite Catholics to encounter God's mercy through the sacrament.

More broadly, the study contributes to a second mission of The Catholic Pulse Report: providing a clearer and more accurate picture of Catholic belief and practice in the United States.

## Study Design

The survey was developed through a multi-stage research process. The project began with qualitative interviews with Catholic priests to understand the pastoral questions they encounter and the populations they most hope to reach. An exploratory qualitative exercise with Mass-attending Catholics using an online research platform also gathered reflections on experiences with Confession, including barriers that discourage participation and motivations that draw Catholics toward the sacrament. Insights from these phases helped shape both the topics and wording of the survey.

Finally, the survey instrument was reviewed with input from a Catholic theologian and a PhD statistician to ensure theological clarity and methodological rigor.

The final survey examines the themes outlined in the Objectives section, including Catholics' beliefs about sin and the spiritual life, experiences with Confession, barriers and motivations related to participation, and factors influencing Catholics' willingness to return to the sacrament.



### Research-Informed Survey Design

Survey topics shaped by priest interviews, qualitative Catholic research, and expert review

## Who We Surveyed

This study is based on a national survey of 1,500 U.S. Catholics who attend Mass at least occasionally, collected February 18-25, 2026.

Respondents were recruited through YouGov's national online research panel and screened to ensure they identified as Catholic and attended Mass at least a few times per year. The sample was weighted to reflect the demographic composition of the U.S. Catholic population.

The study design included an oversample of 750 more frequent Mass attendees to support deeper analysis of Catholics most engaged in parish life. While the survey captures perspectives across a broader range of Catholics, the primary analysis focuses on those who attend Mass at least monthly, the group most likely to respond to pastoral invitations to participate in Confession.



**1,500  
US Catholics**

Fielded with YouGov using a nationally balanced online sample



### Mass-Attending

Primary analysis centers on Catholics who attend Mass monthly or more often

## WHAT WE LEARNED

# The **desire for mercy** is the strongest draw to Confession.

Across multiple questions in the study, Catholics most often point to mercy as the reason they would go to Confession. **PAGE 28**

## This study introduces a **new framework** for understanding Confession participation.

Catholics fall into four distinct participation groups – Confesses Regularly, Confesses Occasionally, Haven't Been in a While, and Went as a Child Participants – revealing a more nuanced and hopeful picture of engagement with the sacrament.

**PAGE 2**

## Many Catholics who are not currently going to Confession say they would like to go **more often**.

Both Haven't Been in a While and Went as a Child Participants express openness to returning, suggesting that disengagement from Confession often reflects distance rather than rejection of the sacrament.

**PAGE 6**

## The **most common barriers** to Confession are personal and spiritual rather than practical.

Embarrassment, uncertainty about the process, and lack of habit appear more frequently than logistical obstacles.

**PAGE 22**

## Catholics who go to Confession **consistently** report experiencing its core spiritual fruits.

Participants most often describe knowing they are forgiven, reassurance of God's love and mercy, and interior peace.

**PAGE 32**



THE BOTTOM LINE

While most Catholics are not currently participating in Confession regularly, **many remain open** to returning.



# Have you been to confession lately?

## Understanding Catholic Confession Participation in the United States

Most research on Confession measures participation by asking how often Catholics have gone to the sacrament within a recent period, typically the past year. Figure 1 presents this familiar view by comparing results from this study with findings from a recent national study on the subject. Both show a similar pattern: between two-thirds and three-quarters of Catholics report not having gone to Confession in the past year.

While this measure is helpful for understanding overall participation levels, it provides only a partial picture of Catholics' relationship to the sacrament.



Figure 01. Confession Frequency.

Study	Regular (> a few times/year)	Occasional (1-3x/year)	Not in past year
Pew (2025)	12%	12%	77%
Vinea (2026)	20%	12%	68%

Note: Because surveys use slightly different response categories, these figures should be interpreted as directional comparisons rather than exact equivalents.

68% have  
not been  
in the  
past year

n = 1,500

Looking only at recent participation can group together Catholics with very different experiences of Confession.

To better understand these differences, Figure 3 (from our study) examines the history of Confession among Catholics who have not gone within the past year. Within this group, a majority report having gone to Confession as adults at some point in their lives, while others recall participating mainly during childhood. A smaller share report never having gone at all.

These distinctions reveal that Catholics who have not recently participated in Confession are not a single group, but rather represent several different lived experiences.

Figure 03.

n = 1,021

## Confession History

Among Catholics Who Have Not Gone in the Past Year

58%

Have gone as adults, but **not in the past year**

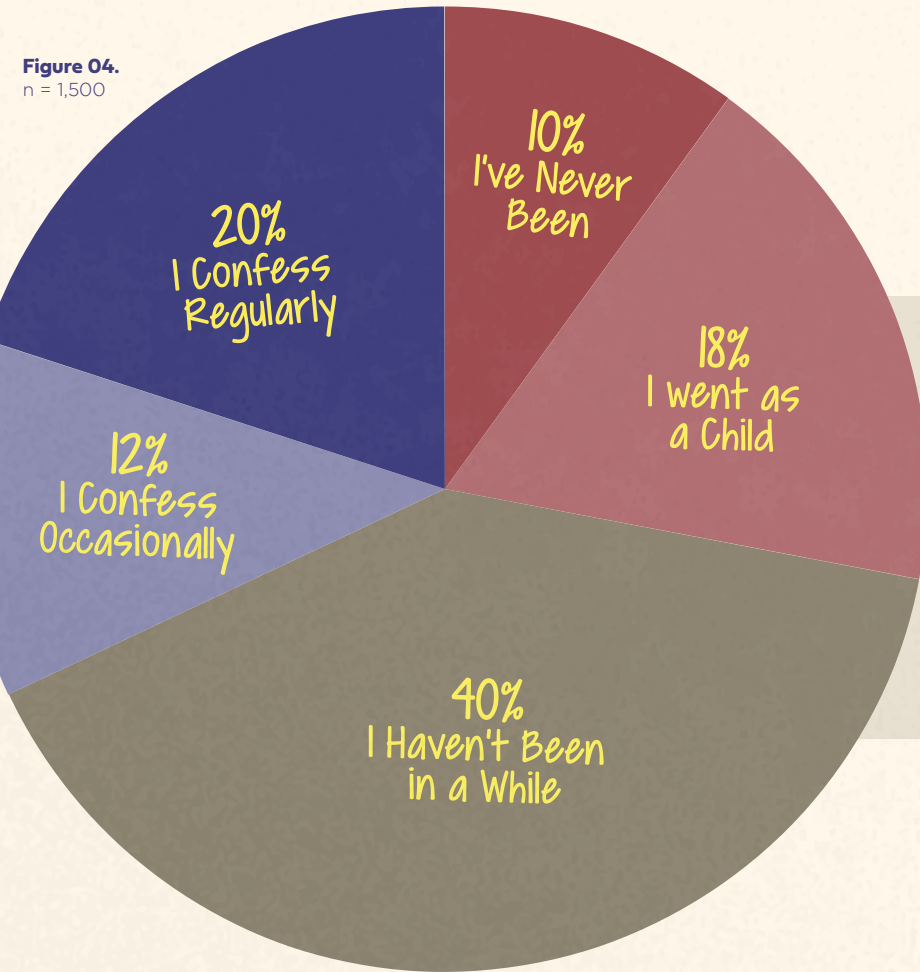
27%

Went mainly **as children**

15%

Have **never gone**

Figure 04.  
n = 1,500



# Have you been to confession lately?

The patterns shown on the previous page suggest that Catholics' relationship to the Sacrament of Reconciliation cannot be understood simply by looking at recent participation. Many Catholics are not simply non-participants. They have a relationship history with the sacrament.

When recent participation and lifetime experience with Confession are considered together, a clearer picture emerges. Combining these dimensions reveals five distinct patterns of participation in Confession:

- Confess Regularly**  
Catholics who have gone to Confession four or more times in the past year.
- Confess Occasionally**  
Catholics who have gone to Confession one to three times in the past year.
- Haven't Been in a While**  
Catholics who have gone to Confession in the past but have not gone within the past year.
- Went as a Child**  
Catholics who have gone to Confession as children but not as adults.
- Have Never Been**  
Catholics who report never having gone to Confession.

These participation definitions provide a clearer map of Catholics' relationship to Confession and help distinguish between very different pastoral situations within the broader Catholic population. One clear finding is that the single largest group of Catholics are those who have previously gone to Confession, but who no longer do. Recall that this is among Catholics who go to Mass at least a few times a year. Those who attend Mass "seldom" or "never" were excluded from this study.

# What the Weekly Mass-Goer is Missing

The framework introduced on the previous page can also be applied to Catholics who attend Mass at least monthly, including the large share who attend weekly or more often. Priests interviewed in the qualitative phase of this research identified Catholics who were “most often in the pews” as a group of particular interest, noting that many of those who regularly attend Mass do not go to Confession. Additionally, encouraging infrequent Mass-goers to participate in Confession would likely require a different strategy.

In our sample of monthly+ Mass-goers, 73% attended Mass weekly or more often. Among these Catholics, the same participation patterns seen on the previous page emerge. While a meaningful share participate regularly in Confession, many others have either lapsed from the sacrament or last experienced it during childhood. The results among weekly+ Mass-goers are not materially different.

In our sample, 7% of respondents report never having gone to Confession. Because this group has no direct experience with the sacrament

and represents a small share of the sample, the analysis that follows focuses on Catholics who have had some experience with Confession and who attend Mass at least monthly. Using the framework introduced in the previous section, the remainder of this report examines how these Catholics understand, experience, and approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Sample sizes by participation segment were: Confess Regularly (n=343), Confess Occasionally (n=172), Haven't Been in a While (n=474), and Went as a Child (n=143).

Figure 05.

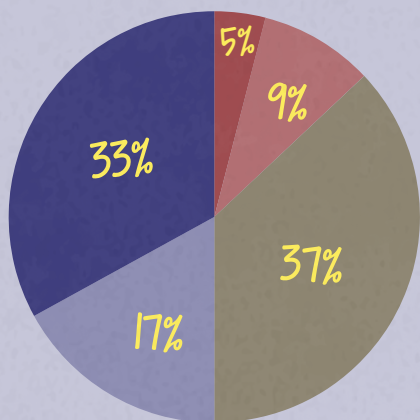
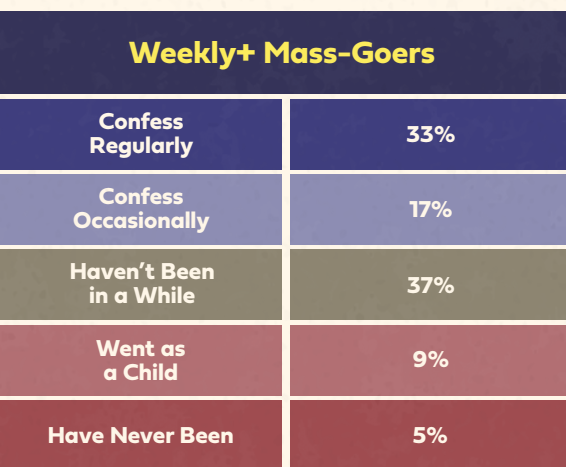
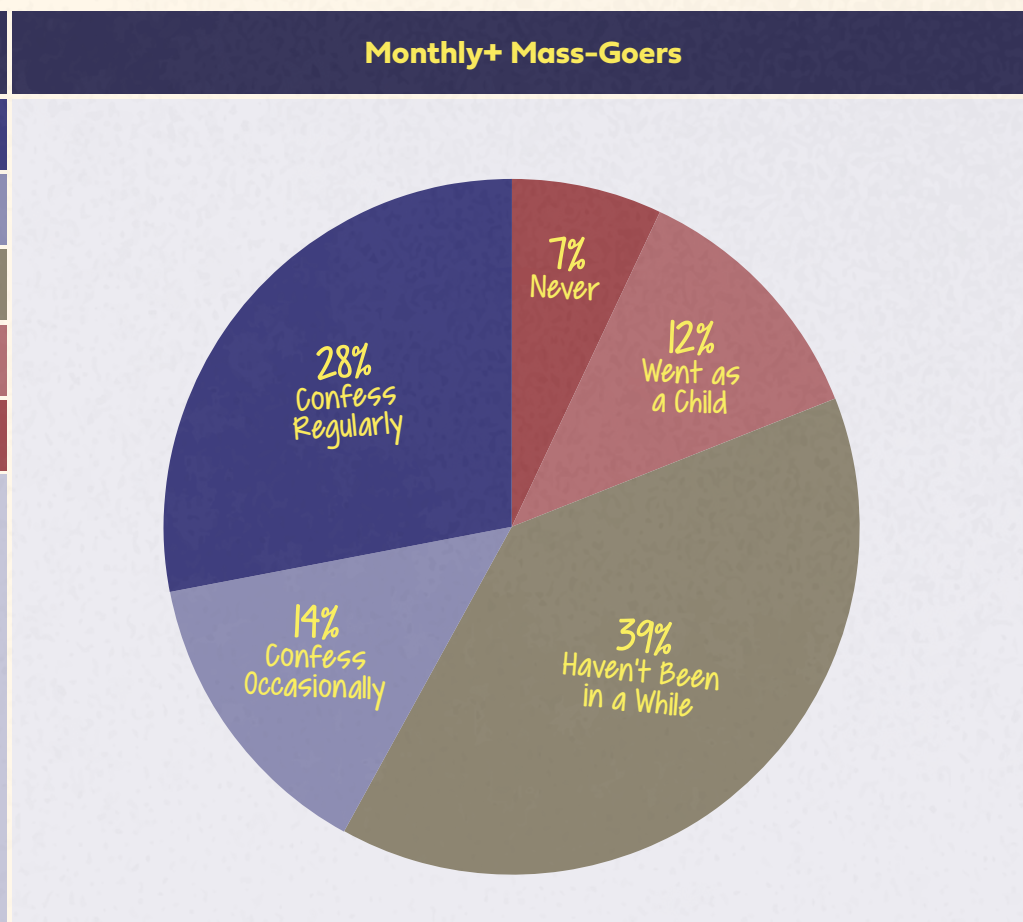


Figure 06.





# They Want to Return

**About two-thirds of those who haven't gone in a while and half who went as a child remain open to returning to Confession more often.**

Rather than suggesting that disengagement from Confession is final, these findings indicate that many Catholics who do not currently participate remain open to returning. Across several groups that participate infrequently or not at all, substantial numbers express openness to returning.

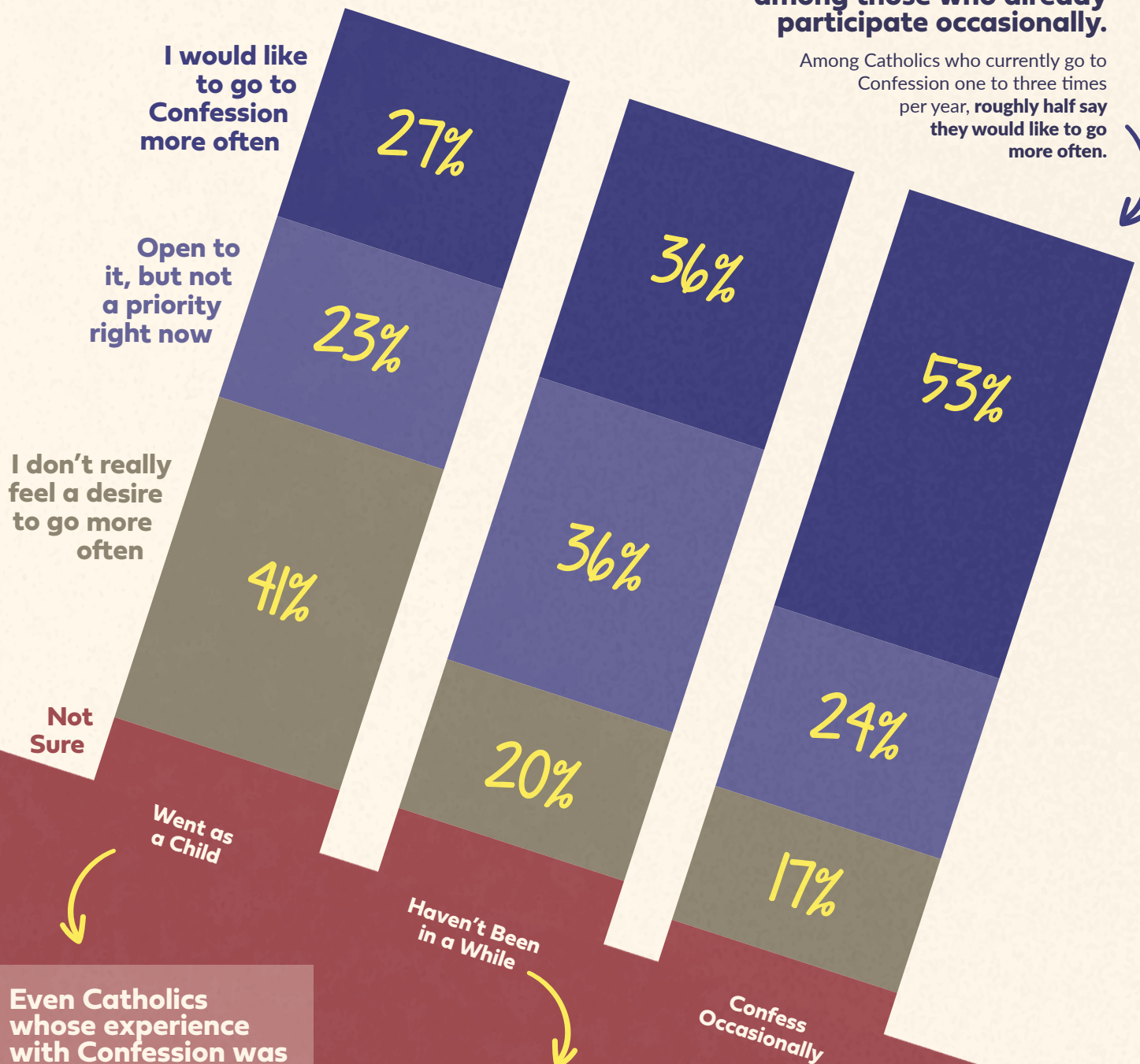
**Many Catholics who are not currently participating in Confession are not opposed to the sacrament itself. They may simply be waiting for an invitation or encouragement to return.**

This presents an opportunity not only for pastors, but for the broader Catholic community to help renew awareness of the sacrament and encourage Catholics to rediscover Confession as a regular part of spiritual life. The sections that follow explore beliefs, barriers, motivations, and experiences that shape Catholics' relationship with Confession and may help inform efforts to renew participation.

Figure 07.  
n = 789

**Interest is also present among those who already participate occasionally.**

Among Catholics who currently go to Confession one to three times per year, roughly half say they would like to go more often.



**Even Catholics whose experience with Confession was mainly in childhood show openness.**

Among those who have not participated in Confession as adults, more than one-quarter say they would like to go more often, and roughly half say they are at least open to returning.

**Many Catholics who have lapsed remain open to returning to Confession.**

More than seven in ten Catholics who have gone to Confession in the past but not within the past year say they are at least open to going more often today, with half of these indicating they would like to go to Confession more frequently.



PART ONE

# How Catholics Understand Sin, Responsibility, and God

## The Spiritual Framework

Before examining the barriers and motivations that influence Catholics' participation in Confession, it is helpful to first understand the broader spiritual framework within which Catholics approach the sacrament. Confession does not exist in isolation. Participation in the sacrament is shaped by how Catholics understand sin, how they think about their relationship with God, what spiritual authorities they trust, and the patterns of faith formation and practice that have shaped their lives.

The findings in this section provide context for the rest of the report by exploring several aspects of Catholic belief and practice, including familiarity with traditional moral language, views about sin and moral responsibility, beliefs about spiritual realities such as God, Satan, heaven, and hell, the role of Scripture as a source of authority, early exposure to the sacrament, and broader patterns of Catholic practice.

Overall, these findings suggest that differences in Confession participation are connected not only to practical barriers but also to deeper patterns of belief, formation, and spiritual habit. At the same time, they reveal several points of shared belief across Catholics, including strong belief in God, broad respect for Scripture, and widespread exposure to the sacrament during childhood. These shared foundations may provide important points of connection when Church leaders speak about sin, repentance, forgiveness, and the broader spiritual life.

# We've got an Accountability

## Gap

**Catholics continue to affirm core moral principles, though personal accountability is weaker.**

To explore how Catholics think about sin and moral responsibility, respondents were asked to choose between two contrasting statements in four areas of moral life. Each pair reflected either a traditional Catholic framing of sin or a more individual or psychological interpretation.

The four areas examined were the importance of reflection and amendment after moral failure, objective moral norms, the relational nature of sin, and personal accountability before God.

### Sense of Sin Exercise

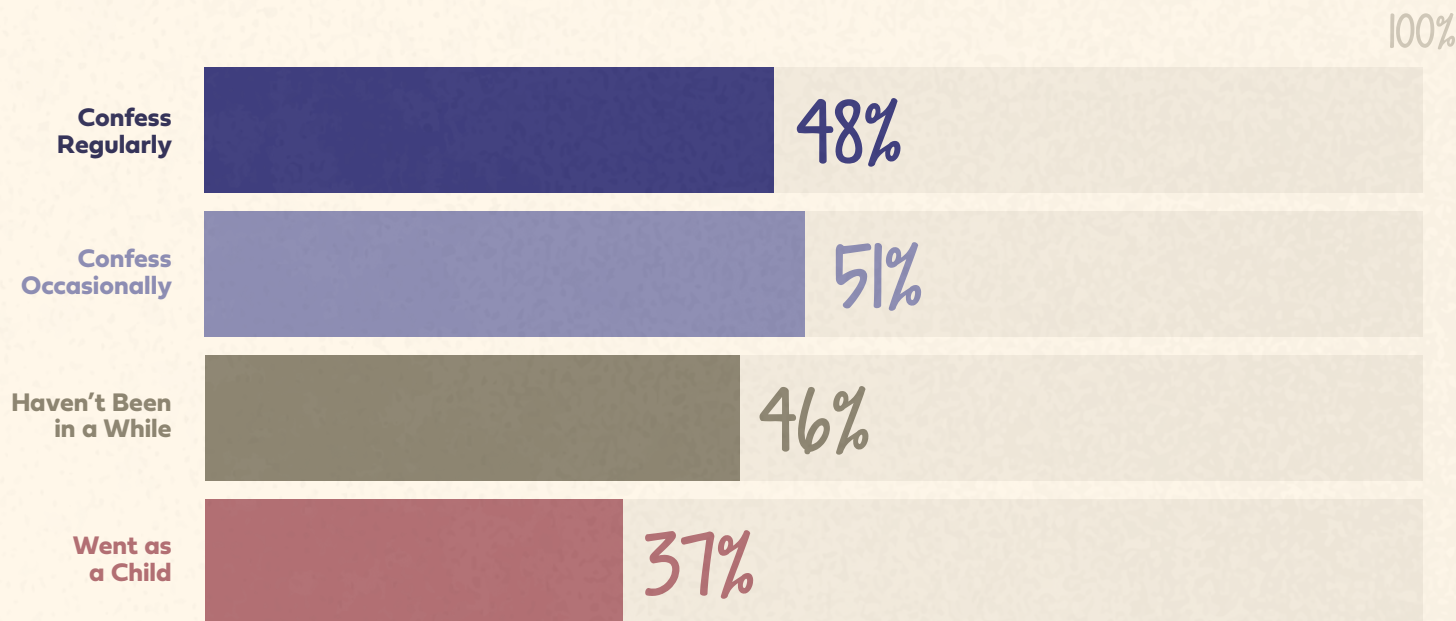
For each column pair, respondents picked the one closest to their view

(Below categories not shown)	<b>Personal Accountability</b>	<b>Relational Theology</b>	<b>Moral Objectivity</b>	<b>Repentant Disposition</b>
<b>Catholic Moral Framing</b>	God is personally concerned with my specific choices and behaviors	Doing something seriously wrong primarily damages a person's relationship with God	Some types of behavior are morally wrong even if a person feels sincere or justified	When people struggle morally, it's usually helpful to reflect on it and try to make amends
<b>Alternate Moral Framing</b>	God is mostly concerned with my overall way of life	Doing something seriously wrong primarily disrupts a person's inner peace or self-understanding	Whether a type of behavior is morally wrong depends mostly on a person's sincerity and circumstances	When people struggle morally, it's usually healthier to move forward without dwelling on it

Figure 08.  
n = 1,132

### Personal Accountability

I believe God is personally concerned with my specific choices and behaviors.



(also here...)

### Relational Theology

I believe doing something seriously wrong primarily damages a person's relationship with God.

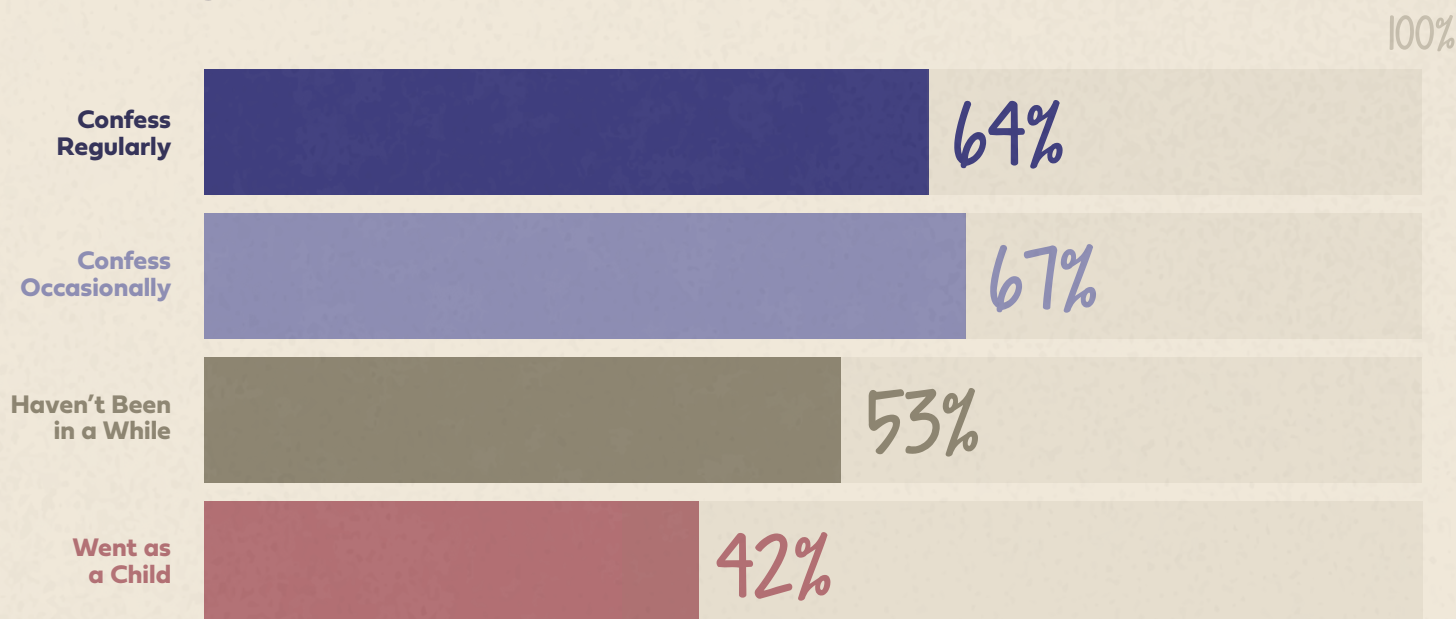


Figure 09.  
n = 1,132

Moral Objectivity

**I believe some types of behavior are morally wrong even if a person feels sincere or justified.**



Repentant Disposition

**I believe when people struggle morally, it's usually helpful to reflect on it and try to make amends.**



# Moral, Not Accountable

The results reveal both areas of agreement and areas where understanding appears less developed across participation groups. Across all groups, large majorities affirm that moral struggles should lead to reflection and amendment, and that some actions are morally wrong regardless of circumstances. These elements of Catholic moral teaching appear widely accepted.

The largest differences appear in how Catholics understand the deeper meaning of sin. Across all participation groups, fewer Catholics affirm that God is personally concerned with their specific moral choices. This suggests that the sense of personal accountability before God may be less firmly rooted than other elements of Catholic moral teaching.

A second gap appears in the relational understanding of sin. Catholics who

participate regularly in Confession are more likely to see serious wrongdoing as damaging one's relationship with God. Among those who have lapsed from the sacrament, and especially those whose experience occurred mainly in childhood, this relational understanding appears less common.

Taken together, these findings suggest that many Catholics already accept key elements of the Church's moral framework. Large majorities affirm the importance of reflection and amendment after moral failure and recognize that some actions are objectively wrong. Building on these foundations may help strengthen two areas where understanding appears less developed: the personal accountability each person has before God and the relational nature of sin as something that damages one's relationship with Him.

# Satan, Hell & Confession

**Catholics widely affirm the spiritual foundations that support Confession.**

To understand how Catholics view key elements of the spiritual life, respondents were asked about their level of belief in several core teachings, including God, Satan, heaven, and hell. The charts below show the share of Catholics who indicate meaningful belief, including those who say they believe even if they have some doubts.

Among Catholics who attend Mass monthly or more often, belief in God remains nearly

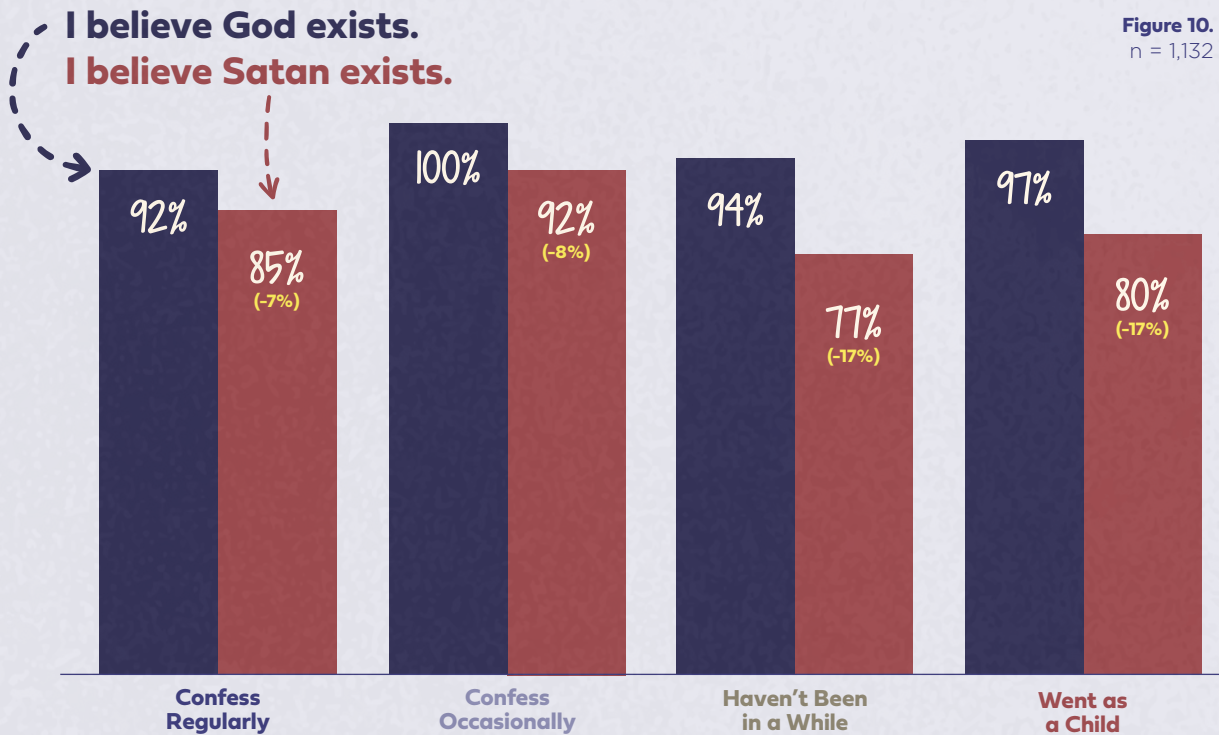


Figure 10.  
n = 1,132

Note: Percentages represent respondents who say they believe God or Satan exists, including those who say they believe but sometimes have doubts. These correspond to the top two categories on a five-point scale that also included often having doubts, being unsure, or not believing.

universal across all Confession participation groups. Belief in Satan and in the possibility of Hell is somewhat lower, though still affirmed by clear majorities.

These patterns suggest that many Catholics retain a strong belief in God and in the hope of Heaven even when other elements of the Christian moral framework are held less firmly. For those seeking to encourage renewed engagement with Confession, this distinction may be important. Messages centered on God’s mercy, forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life are likely to resonate broadly.

The differences become more visible among Catholics who no longer participate in Confession. While belief in Satan declines modestly in these groups, belief

in Hell declines more noticeably. Among those whose experience with Confession occurred primarily in childhood, roughly one-third do not affirm belief in Hell.

This pattern may help explain why the perceived urgency of Confession weakens for some Catholics. While belief in God and hope in Heaven remain strong, belief in the possibility of separation from God is less widely affirmed.

At the same time, teaching that reconnects moral choices with their spiritual consequences, including the possibility of separation from God, may help clarify why the sacrament of Confession remains an important part of the Christian life.

# Speaking of Sin

The language of venial and mortal sin remains widely recognized.

In addition to these beliefs, it is helpful to consider how familiar Catholics are with the traditional language of sin.

As shown in Figure 12, most Catholics across Confession participation groups report high familiarity with the terms venial sin and mortal sin. More Catholics who participate regularly in Confession are likely to say they are very familiar with these concepts.

The largest difference appears among Catholics whose experience with Confession occurred mainly during childhood (Went as a Child Participants). Within this group, a larger share report more limited familiarity with these terms.

This pattern suggests that familiarity with traditional vocabulary around sin may weaken as Catholics become more distant from their early formation without additional exposure or catechesis over time. For those engaging Catholics who do not currently participate in Confession, this provides useful context. Some Catholics may benefit from clearer explanations of these ideas in simple and accessible terms which, in turn, may help make conversations about sin, repentance, and Confession easier to follow.

Figure 11.  
n = 1,132



Note: Percentages represent respondents who say they mostly believe or believe completely in the possibility of being in heaven or hell for eternity, the highest rankings on a 6-point scale.

Figure 12.

Are you familiar with the terms 'venial sin' and 'mortal sin'?

	Not or slightly familiar	Somewhat familiar	Very familiar
<b>Confess Regularly:</b>	8%	23%	69%
<b>Confess Occasionally:</b>	7%	20%	73%
<b>Haven't Been in a While:</b>	16%	29%	55%
<b>Went as a Child:</b>	23%	30%	47%

n = 1,132

# Scripture Matters

Scripture remains a widely accepted source of spiritual authority across participation groups, including among many Catholics who do not regularly go to Confession.

Most Catholics who attend Mass at least monthly continue to view the Bible as either a central authority that shapes how they believe and live, or as an important spiritual guide in matters of faith and life.

This pattern holds even among Catholics who do not currently participate in Confession. While the share who see Scripture as a central authority declines somewhat among Haven't Been in a While and Went as a Child Participants, a clear majority still view the Bible as at least an important source of spiritual guidance.

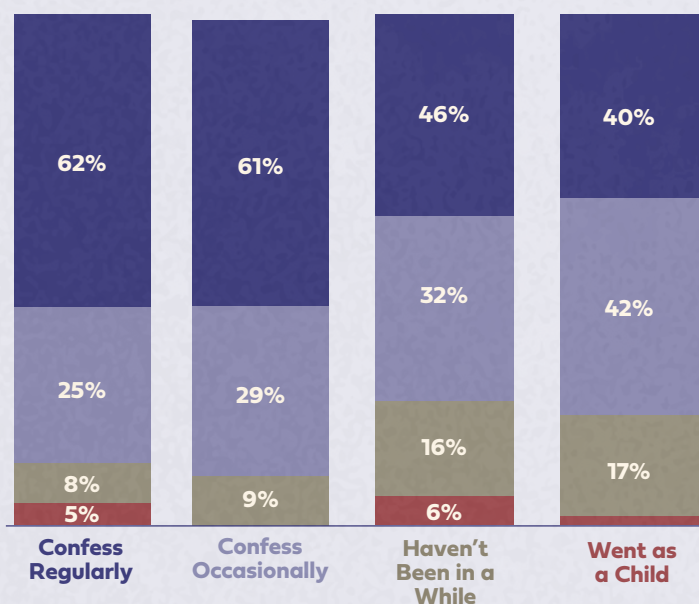
For those speaking or writing about Confession, this suggests that references to Scripture when discussing sin, forgiveness, reconciliation, and God's mercy are likely to resonate with a broad share of Catholics, including many who do not regularly participate in the sacrament.



Figure 13.

## What is the Bible to you?

- Word of God and central authority that shapes how I believe and live
- Contains wisdom and moral insight, plays limited role in how I live my faith
- Important spiritual guide and authority in some matters of faith and life
- Collection of human writings, I look elsewhere for spiritual and moral guidance



n = 1,132

# The Apple Doesn't Fall Far

Seeing parents or guardians go to Confession is associated with higher participation later in life, though parental example alone does not determine adult practice.

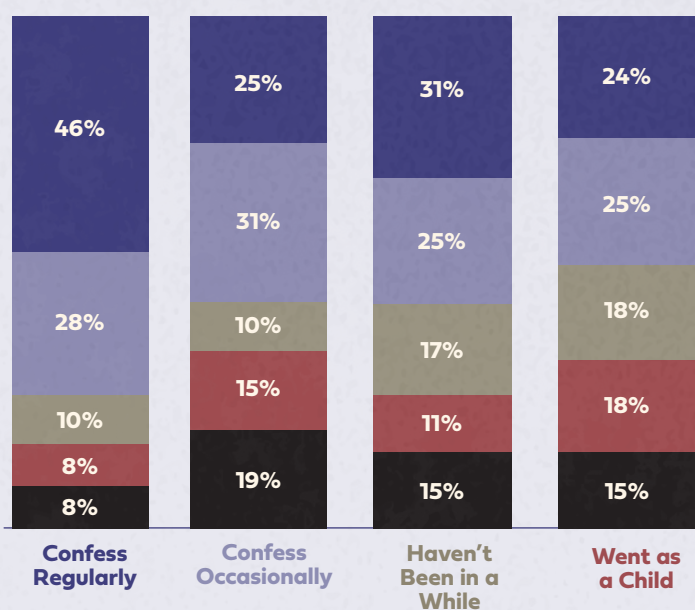
Catholics who recall seeing their parents or guardians go to Confession regularly are more likely to participate in the sacrament themselves today. Regular Confession participants are far more likely than other groups to report that their parents went regularly as well.

At the same time, parental example does not fully determine adult behavior. Many Catholics who remember their parents going to Confession do not currently participate themselves. This pattern is especially visible among the Confess Occasionally group, many of whom appear to have grown up around the sacrament but do not practice it consistently today.

Overall, the findings suggest that parental example helps establish familiarity with the sacrament and may shape early habits of participation. However, sustaining those habits into adulthood likely depends on additional factors, including personal belief, spiritual formation, and experiences with the sacrament later in life.

Figure 14.

## Did your parent/guardian go to Confession when you were growing up?



n = 1,132

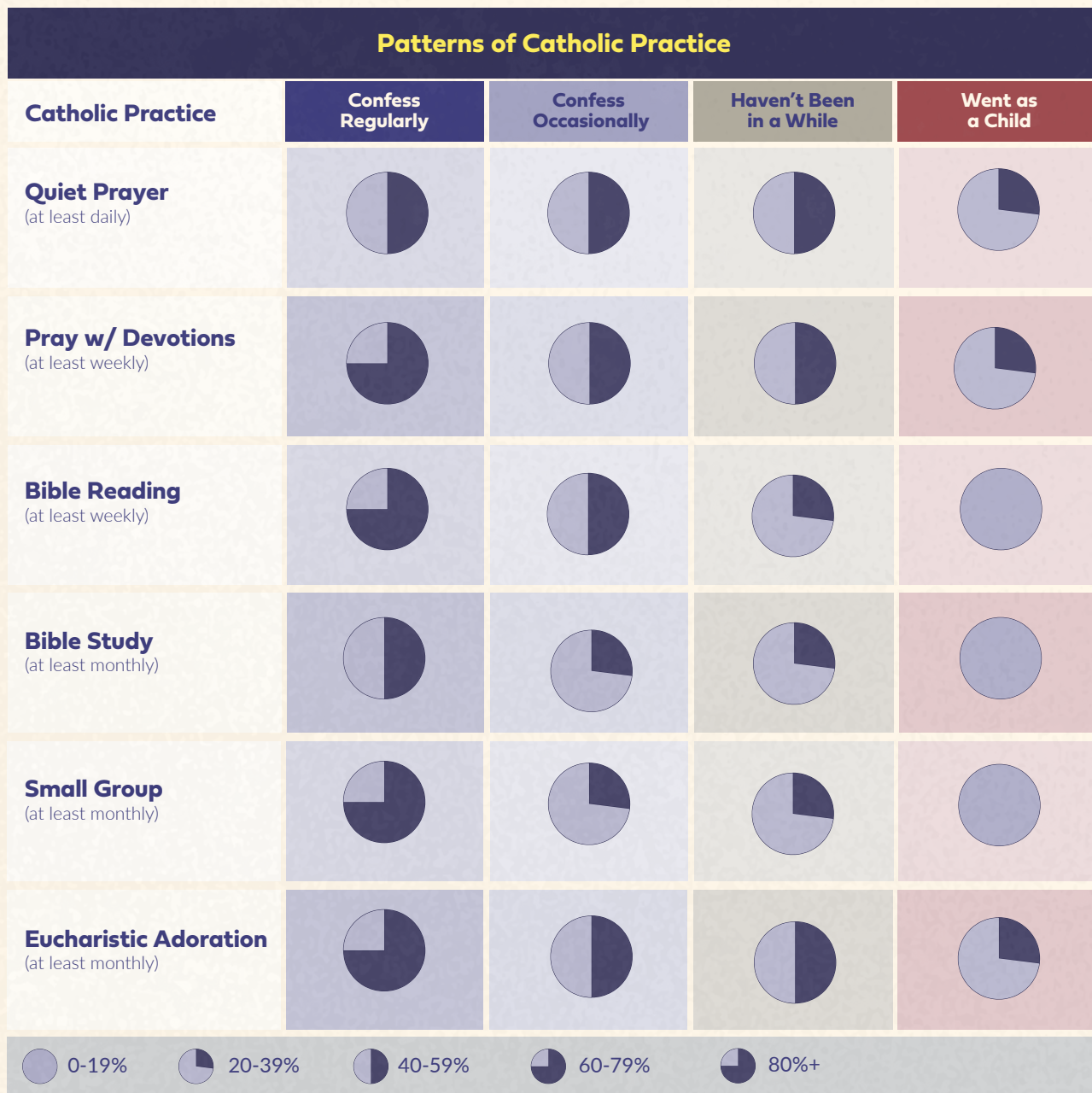


# Signs of Active Faith

Confession participation is closely associated with broader patterns of Catholic spiritual practice.

Figure 15.

n = 1,132



Note: Icons represent the approximate share of respondents in each group reporting the practice at the specified frequency.

The differences between Confession participation groups are reflected not only in how often Catholics go to Confession, but also in broader patterns of Catholic spiritual practice.

Those who confess regularly tend to show higher engagement across a range of spiritual activities, including devotional prayer, Scripture reading, Eucharistic Adoration, and participation in small groups. These practices appear less consistently among Catholics who participate in Confession occasionally and decline further among those who have not gone in the past year. Among Catholics

whose experience with Confession occurred primarily in childhood, participation in most devotional and communal practices is relatively limited, suggesting that many in this group participate primarily in Mass but engage less often in other forms of spiritual life.

At the same time, some practices remain relatively common across groups. Daily quiet prayer, for example, appears across all segments, suggesting that many Catholics maintain some form of personal spiritual life even when sacramental participation declines.

#### PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

### Connect Confession to **existing** spiritual practices:

Participation in Confession often accompanies other practices such as prayer, devotions, Scripture reading, and Eucharistic Adoration.

### Begin with **personal** prayer:

Daily quiet prayer appears across all participation groups, making it a natural starting point for conversations about Confession and the broader spiritual life.

### Recognize the role of **spiritual** habits:

Confession participation often reflects broader patterns of prayer, reflection, and engagement in the life of the Church.



PART TWO

# What Shapes Confession Participation



## KEY FINDINGS

### **Many Catholics who do not go to Confession believe they can ask God for forgiveness directly instead.**

This view is cited by 70% of Haven't Been in a While Participants and 81% of Went as a Child Participants, making it the most common reason given for not going. Habit and discomfort also emerge as meaningful barriers.

### **Catholics are most strongly drawn to Confession by the desire for God's mercy.**


Top motivations include receiving God's mercy (83%), preparing to receive Communion (74%), and experiencing interior peace and healing (73%). Many also see it as an important part of being Catholics (74%).

### **Catholics report a wide range of spiritual fruits from Confession.**

The most common include knowing their sins are forgiven (61%) and feeling reassured of God's love and mercy (60%), along with renewed faith, encouragement, and a deep sense of peace.

### **Many Catholics say they would be more likely to go if the sacrament were presented more clearly and pastorally.**

The most helpful factors include hearing that struggling with the same sins is normal (70%), a greater emphasis on mercy rather than judgment (69%), and clearer guidance about what to expect in Confession.



# The Barriers to Grace

# 63%

Obstacles to Confession are primarily personal and spiritual rather than logistical.

If Confession participation is to grow, it is not enough to emphasize its importance. We must understand what prevents Catholics from going, or from going more often. Much of what is said about these obstacles comes from pastoral experience or anecdotal observation. While valuable, these perspectives do not show how widespread particular barriers are or which ones carry the greatest weight.

This study therefore sought to measure the reasons Catholics themselves say contribute to their hesitation about going to Confession.

## How We Measured Barriers

Respondents were presented with sixteen potential obstacles spanning five broad themes:

- Theological framing
- Habit and formation gaps
- Personal discomfort
- Uncertainty about the sacrament
- Practical considerations

For each item, respondents indicated whether it plays no role, a small role, or a moderate, significant, or major role in their decision not to go to Confession,

or not to go more often. We report the percentage identifying each item as playing at least a moderate role. These sixteen items provide a wide-angle view of the landscape of hesitation surrounding the sacrament today.

## What the Data Reveal

Several important patterns emerge from the sixteen barriers tested. Most notably, four stand out as the most frequently cited reasons Catholics hesitate to participate in the sacrament. One rises clearly above the others: the belief that forgiveness can be sought directly from God in private prayer without going to a priest.

The remaining three cluster more closely together. Two reflect personal discomfort. One concerns embarrassment about speaking sins aloud, while another relates to discomfort with the process itself. A fourth barrier reflects habit, as many Catholics say they simply do not think about going unless something prompts them. These findings point to barriers that are mainly spiritual and personal.

**"I feel like I can ask God for forgiveness directly in prayer without needing to go to a priest."**

This reflects a theological reframing of the sacrament's necessity. For many Catholics, forgiveness is understood as accessible without sacramental mediation. The implication is clear: renewal will require deeper catechesis on the unique grace and assurance offered through sacramental absolution.

While these four barriers stand out in the overall results, the table on the following page shows that their influence varies significantly depending on a Catholic's level of participation in the sacrament.

The widest difference appears on the belief that forgiveness can be sought directly from God without going to a priest. This view is cited far more frequently by Catholics who have not gone to Confession in some time, and especially by those who last participated as children.

Discomfort-related barriers show a similar pattern. Feelings of embarrassment about speaking sins aloud and discomfort with the Confession process are both reported more often by Catholics who have not gone in years and by those whose last experience was in childhood.

Habit shows a somewhat different pattern. Saying that Confession simply does not come to mind is common across most participation groups. Those who do not go to Confession regularly report similar levels, while Catholics who confess

regularly stand apart, citing this barrier less frequently.

Looking beyond the four most frequently cited barriers reveals a broader landscape of concerns surrounding Confession. While those four stand out clearly, many additional factors appear not far below them. As shown in the bar chart on the next page, roughly one-quarter to one-third of Catholics report uncertainty about what to confess, fear of doing the sacrament incorrectly, or concerns about confidentiality.

# 48%

**"I don't really think about going to Confession unless something specific prompts me to go."**

This points to habit rather than opposition. Confession is not actively resisted; it is simply not integrated into regular spiritual life.

Prompts such as Lent or crisis moments often become the only triggers.

# 46%

**"I feel embarrassed or ashamed talking about my sins out loud."**

Emotional vulnerability remains significant. The sacrament requires verbal disclosure, and that reality can create hesitation even among believers. This underscores the importance of priestly approachability and pastoral tone.

# 44%

**"I find the process of Confession uncomfortable or stressful."**

Beyond embarrassment, the overall experience itself can feel intimidating to some. Approachability and a warm tone and demeanor will go a long way to overcoming this concern.

**Those most distant from Confession are much more likely to say they can seek forgiveness directly from God.**

Others say that Confession simply never became a regular habit in their spiritual lives.

This distribution underscores an important point. Hesitation toward Confession rarely stems from a single issue. Instead, it reflects several overlapping influences. Some barriers are theological, some are emotional, and others relate to uncertainty or habit.

**Implications**


These findings suggest that renewing participation in Confession will likely require addressing multiple dimensions over time. The belief that

one can go directly to God may need to be addressed not only through catechesis, but through preaching, parish missions, retreats, and other forms of formation that clarify the distinct graces of the sacrament. At the same time, the prominence of embarrassment and discomfort suggests that pastoral tone, priestly approachability, and a more welcoming experience also matter.

Figure 16.

n = 1,132

What Keeps Catholics from Confession?				
Reason for not going	Confess Regularly	Confess Occasionally	Haven't Been in a While	Went as a Child
Can ask God directly without needing a priest	53%	46%	70%	81%
Don't think about going	37%	56%	53%	48%
Embarrassed or ashamed to speak sins	40%	41%	50%	52%
Confession is uncomfortable or stressful	32%	34%	53%	54%

 Significantly higher than the other groups.

Note: Percentages represent respondents who say each plays a moderate, significant, or major role.

Figure 17.  
n = 1,132

# Why don't you go to Confession anymore?

Hesitation about Confession is driven more by theological beliefs, habit gaps, and discomfort than by logistical barriers.

Percent saying the factor plays a moderate, significant, or major role.





# Saturday Afternoons Isn't Enough

Many Catholics say additional Confession times would help them participate.

Scheduling does not appear to be a primary driver of Confession participation. Earlier findings show that theological understanding, habit formation, and personal comfort play a larger role. However, scheduling still functions as a meaningful secondary factor that can either enable or discourage participation.

When asked about the traditional Saturday afternoon Confession time offered in many parishes, only a minority say it fits their schedule very well. About one-third of Confess Regularly participants report that this time works very well for them,

compared with roughly one-quarter of Confess Occasionally, Haven't Been in a While, and Went as a Child Participants. For many Catholics, the traditional schedule appears workable but not ideal.

When asked which additional times might make them more likely to go, no single alternative time emerges as a universal solution. Instead, the results suggest that Catholics respond best to expanded availability, with weekday evenings and Sunday mornings appearing as the most promising additions to the traditional Saturday schedule.

Additionally, about half of Catholics who do not participate regularly say that more convenient Confession times would remove an obstacle and make them more likely to go. Scheduling alone will not create the desire to go, but it may remove practical friction for Catholics who are already open to returning.

About half of Catholics who do not go regularly say **more convenient Confession times** would make them more likely to participate.

Figure 18.

Confession Time and Scheduling Preferences				
Question	Response Option	Confess Occasionally	Haven't Been in a While	Went as a Child
<b>Saturday Afternoon Fit</b>	Saturday afternoon fits schedule <b>"very well"</b>	28%	23%	24%
<b>Additional Confession times that would make them more likely to go</b>	Sunday mornings before Mass	36%	31%	21%
	Weekday evenings	37%	25%	21%
	Saturday mornings	27%	22%	14%
	Weekday mornings	23%	22%	13%
	Sunday evenings	11%	9%	5%
<b>Impact of more convenient Confession times*</b>	Would make them "more likely to go"	55%	54%	37%
	"I would probably not go [more often]"	45%	46%	63%

\*Note: Respondents were asked: "Thinking realistically, which statement comes closer to your situation?"

n = 789





## PART THREE

# Drawn to Mercy

The desire to receive God's forgiveness and mercy stands above every other motivation drawing Catholics toward Confession.

To understand what draws Catholics toward Confession, respondents were asked which factors meaningfully influence their participation. The results reveal a clear hierarchy of motivations.

The strongest appeal is **receiving God's forgiveness and mercy**, which stands noticeably above every other motivation measured. Even among Catholics who do not currently participate in Confession, the promise of forgiveness remains deeply compelling. This suggests that the central spiritual logic of the sacrament is still widely understood.

A second set of motivations centers on **personal spiritual renewal**. Many Catholics view Confession as a source of interior peace, healing in areas of struggle, and strength to change. These responses indicate that the sacrament is often experienced less as a formal obligation and more as a path toward personal restoration.

Other motivations relate more to **Catholic identity and formation**, including preparation for Communion, seasonal invitations, or reconciliation with the Church. These factors matter, but they tend to resonate less strongly than the more personal motivations of forgiveness, healing, and spiritual clarity.

## Implications

For many Catholics, the most compelling invitation to Confession begins with the promise of mercy and renewal. Messaging that emphasizes forgiveness, healing, and spiritual freedom may resonate more strongly than appeals based primarily on obligation or identity.

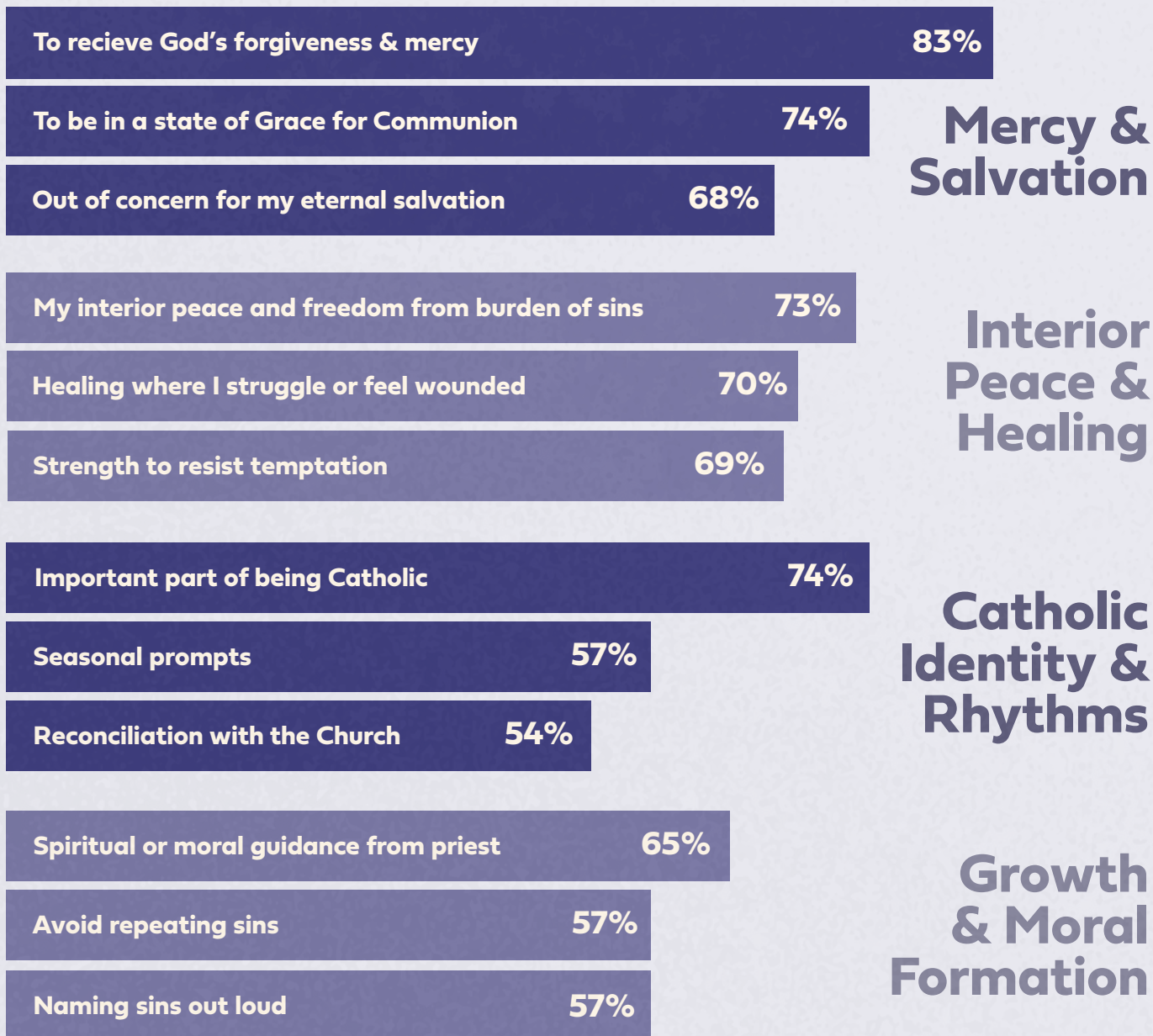
Over time, deeper integration of Confession into Catholic life through spiritual formation, discipleship, and sacramental preparation can help build upon that initial attraction.

Figure 19.  
n = 515

# Why do you go to Confession?

The desire to receive God’s forgiveness and mercy stands above every other motivation drawing Catholics toward Confession.

Percent indicating the factor meaningfully influences Confession participation:



Note: Among those who do not currently go to Confession, percentages reflect respondents who said the factor would move them “quite a bit” or “a great deal” toward going. Among those who do go, percentages reflect those who said the factor plays a significant, or major role in their participation. While the question wording differs slightly, both measure the strength of motivations associated with Confession participation.

## Disengaged Catholics are also motivated by the desire for mercy.

Among Catholics who are not currently going to Confession, one motivation clearly rises above the rest: receiving God's forgiveness and mercy. Roughly half say this would move them "a great deal" toward going, making it the strongest and most consistent attractor across disengaged Catholics. Even among those who have drifted from the sacrament, the desire for mercy remains powerful and personal.

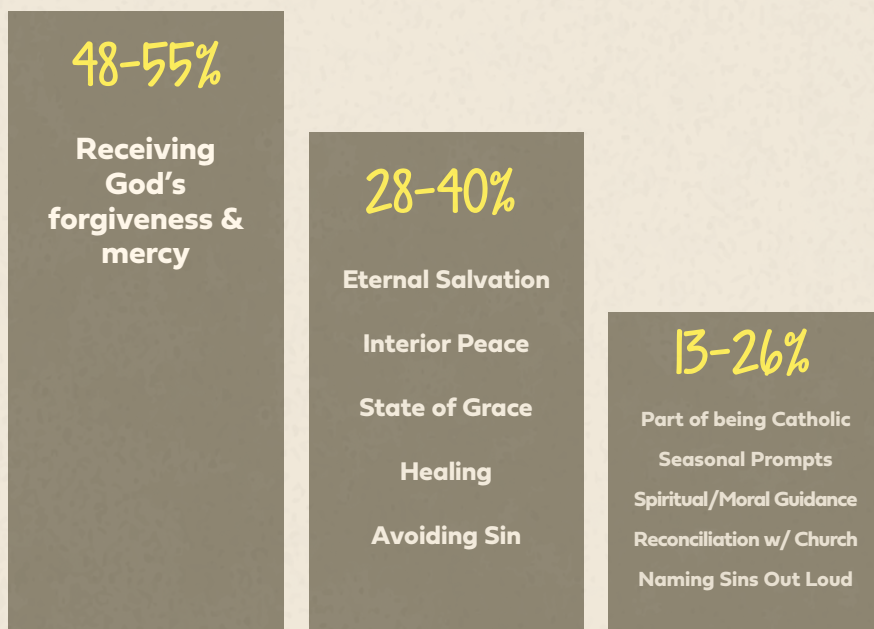
A second tier of motivations centers on spiritual renewal: interior peace, healing where one struggles, reassurance about one's standing before God, and

strength to change. While none match the intensity of the desire for mercy, these responses show that many disengaged Catholics still see Confession as a source of spiritual relief, clarity, and strength.

Motivations tied more directly to Catholic identity or regular rhythms of faith rank lower among those not currently participating. For many disengaged Catholics, Confession appears less connected to ongoing discipleship and more connected to moments when forgiveness or renewal is needed.

## What would draw Disengaged Catholics back to Confession?

Percent saying the factor 'would move me a great deal' towards going



Note: "Would move me a great deal" is the highest point on the 5-point rating scale used for this question. The other points: would not move me, would move me slightly, would move me somewhat, would move me quite a bit.

Figure 20.  
n = 617

When compared to Confess Regularly participants, a different hierarchy emerges. Among those who go frequently, identity-based motivations move much closer to the top. For them, the sacrament appears integrated into what it means to live as a Catholic—not only as a remedy for sin, but as a regular part of discipleship.

These findings suggest that mercy may be the most natural starting point for inviting Catholics back to Confession. Deeper connections to Catholic identity, moral formation, and regular spiritual practice appear more often among those who already participate frequently.

# Knowing & Feeling

Catholics consistently experience mercy, peace, and renewal after confession.

## **The experience of mercy clearly dominates.**

The two strongest outcomes are knowing one has been forgiven by God and feeling reassured of God's love and mercy. Both the head and the heart are affected. Across the study, Confession is most strongly experienced as an encounter with divine mercy.

## **Interior peace is another central fruit.**

Outcomes related to peace, freedom from sin, and spiritual relief cluster near the top. Whatever else Confession represents, Catholics consistently experience it as a source of restoration.

## **The sacrament is also spiritually formative.**

Many report outcomes connected to resisting temptation, growing in self-awareness, and renewing their commitment to live differently. Confession appears to support ongoing conversion, not simply forgiveness.

## **Nearly all outcomes are widely experienced.**

When broader measures are used, including those who report experiencing these outcomes "quite a bit" or "a great deal," large majorities experience many of these fruits.

## **How the Experience Differs by Participation**

Those who confess occasionally experience the core fruits of the sacrament almost as strongly as Confess Regularly participants. This is an encouraging finding: even infrequent participation appears to produce meaningful spiritual benefit. The barrier to more frequent participation does not appear to be a lack of perceived value.

The largest differences emerge in the longer-term fruits associated with repeated participation. Catholics who go regularly are more likely to report deeper experiences such as renewed desire to live their faith, greater confidence in resisting temptation, and lasting spiritual change.

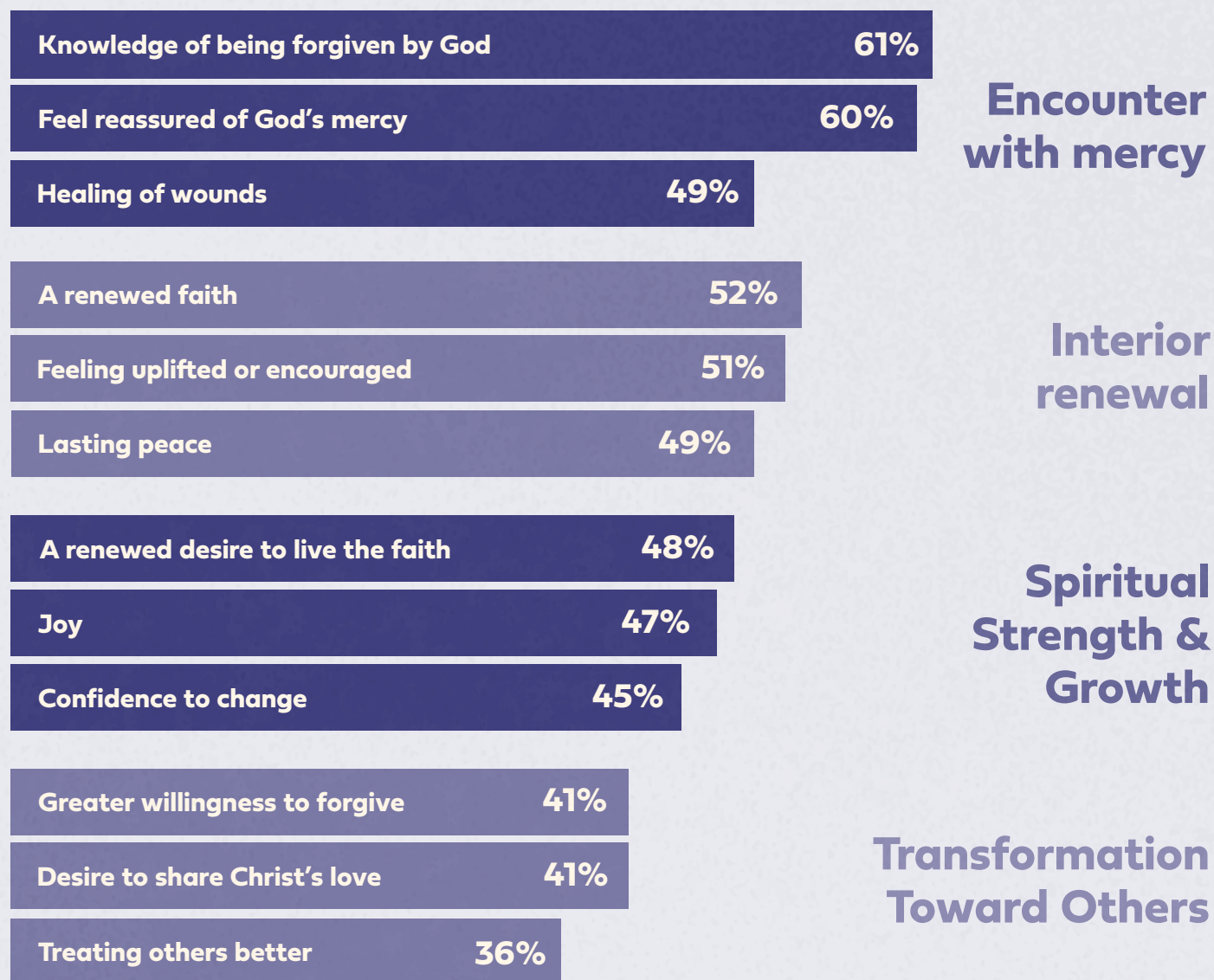
In other words, Occasional participants clearly experience the mercy of the sacrament, while Confess Regularly participants are more likely to experience its ongoing transformative effects.

Figure 21.  
n = 515

# What do you experience after going to Confession?

Confession delivers the very experiences Catholics are seeking, especially the assurance of God's mercy and forgiveness.

Percent indicating they experience each of these "a great deal"



Note: When the broader Top 2 measures ("quite a bit" or "a great deal") on the 5-point rating scale is used, responses across all items range from roughly two-thirds to more than four-fifths of respondents, indicating that most participants experience many of these outcomes to some degree. The "Top Box" (a great deal) results shown here highlight the outcomes that stand out most strongly.

# How To Reach Them

Reassurance, guidance, and clearer teaching could help many Catholics return to Confession.

## Consistent Priorities Across Participation Groups

The relative ranking of these potential supports is remarkably consistent across participation groups. Analysis of the full item ranking (not shown) indicates that the same types of encouragement and guidance tend to rise to the top for Confess Occasionally, Haven't Been in a While, and Went as a Child Participants. What differs is not the order of these supports but their magnitude of impact. Confess Occasionally Participants express the strongest responsiveness overall, followed by Haven't Been in a While Participants, with Went as a Child Participants generally indicating lower levels of impact.

This pattern suggests that the same core pastoral supports resonate across groups, even if the strength of response varies.

## Reassurance About the Sacrament Emerges as the Strongest Support

The two highest-ranked items focus on reassurance about the experience of Confession itself: hearing that it is normal to struggle with the same sins and hearing priests speak more often about God's mercy

rather than judgment in Confession. These findings suggest that many Catholics are not primarily deterred by disagreement with the sacrament, but by uncertainty, hesitation, or concern about how their struggles will be received.

Several other highly ranked supports point in a similar direction. Learning how to examine one's conscience and hearing priests explain what to expect in Confession both rank higher than practical changes such as scheduling. Together, these results suggest that many Catholics are looking less for logistical adjustments and more for reassurance, explanation, and guidance about how the sacrament works.

## Responding Directly to the Barriers Identified Earlier

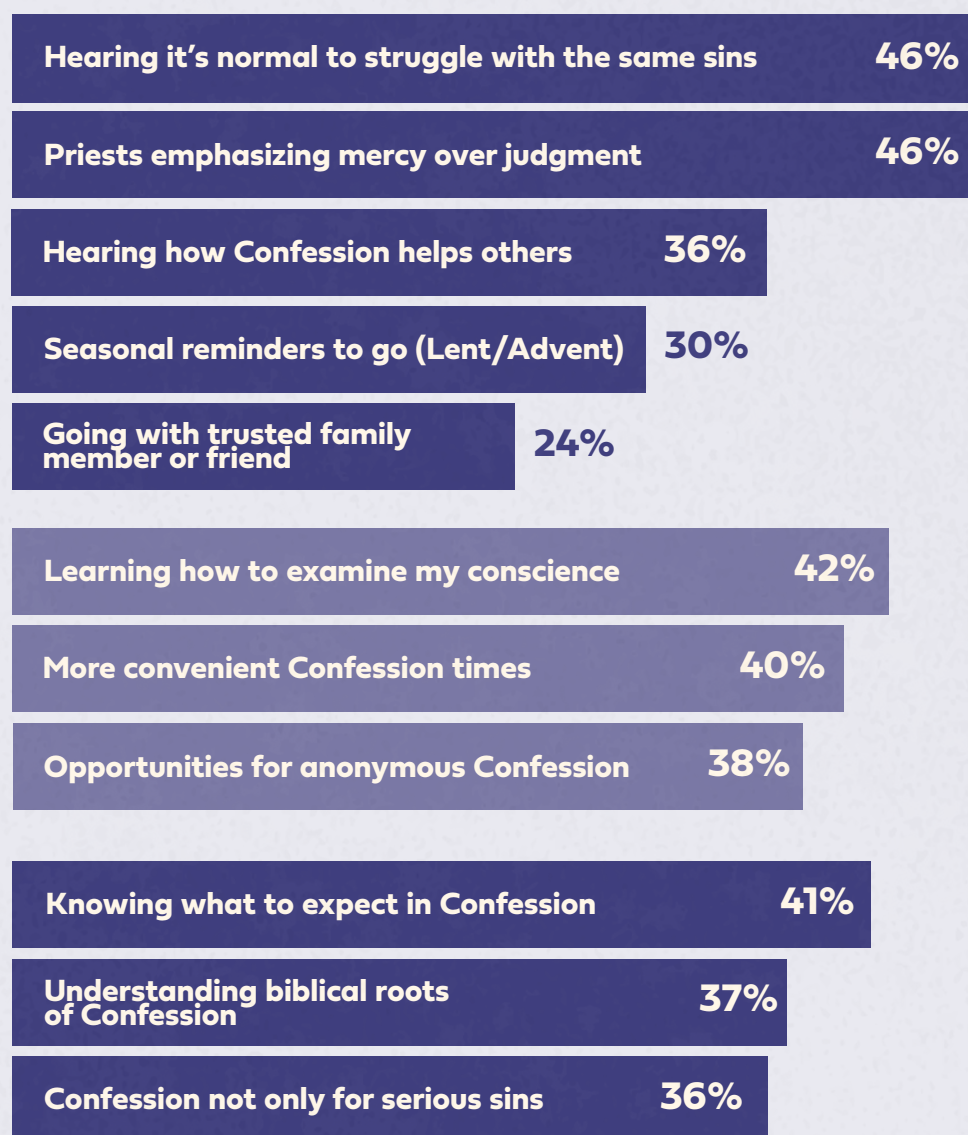
Taken together, these findings offer a practical response to the barriers identified earlier in this report. Reassurance about God's mercy can reduce fear or shame, clearer explanations can address uncertainty about the process, and guidance on examining one's conscience can make Confession feel more approachable. These supports align closely with the concerns Catholics themselves identified as keeping them from the sacrament.

Figure 22.  
n = 789

# What would get you to Confession more often?

Reassurance about God's mercy and guidance on how Confession works matter more than logistical changes in encouraging Catholics to return.

Percent indicating the factor would help them go to Confession more often "a lot" or "tremendously," among Catholics who do not participate regularly in Confession.



Reassurance & Encouragement

Preparation & Access

Understanding the Sacrament

# A Spiritual Flourishing

## What is the Human Flourishing Index?

Human flourishing is a widely used measure in contemporary social science that assesses overall well-being across several dimensions of life. Developed through research at Harvard’s Human Flourishing Program, the index captures not only happiness but also meaning, relationships, character, and life stability.

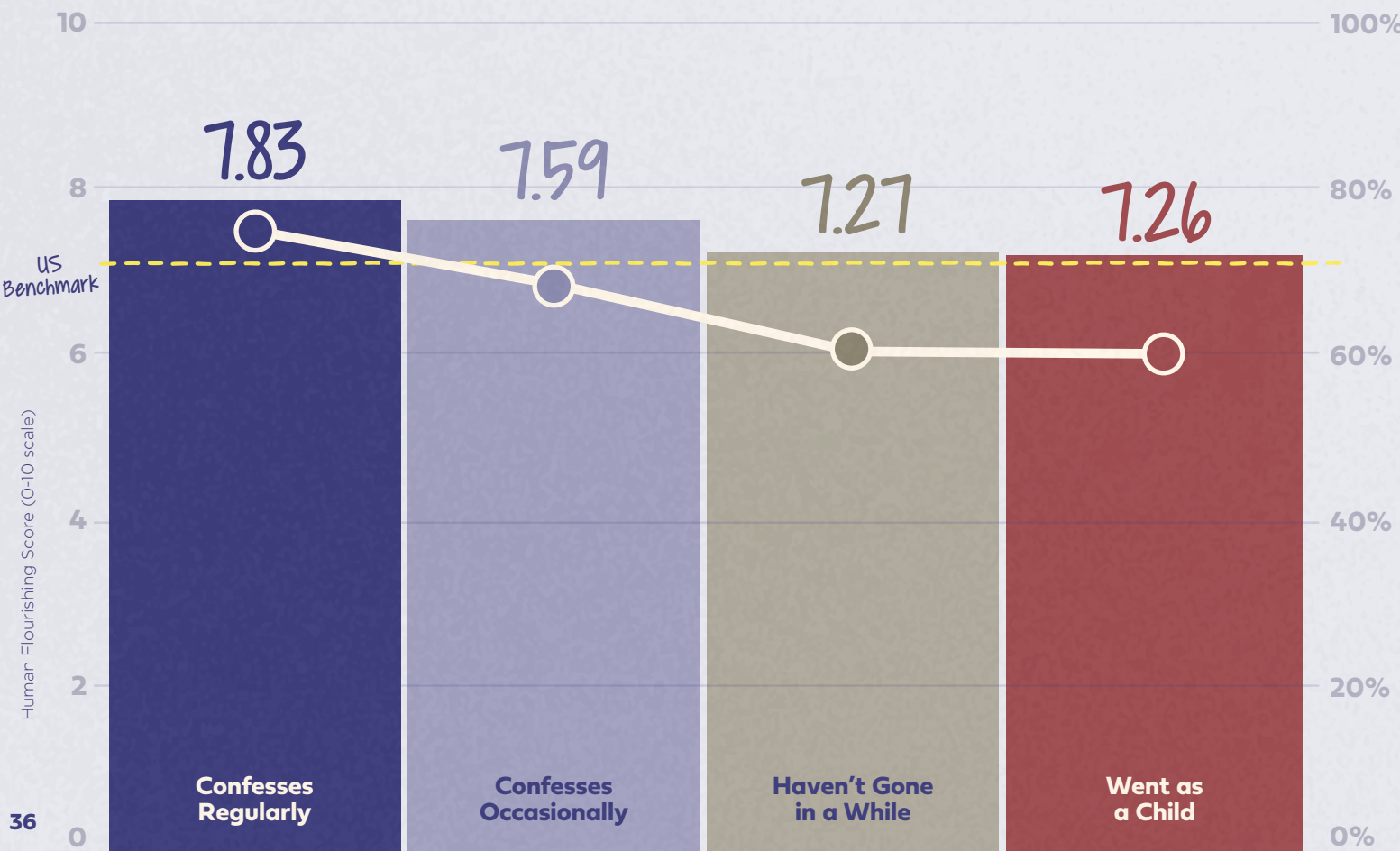
In this study, flourishing was measured using a short six-question battery that has been validated for use in survey research. Respondents rated their current experience across six areas: happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close relationships, and financial or material stability. Scores across these areas are averaged to produce an overall flourishing score on a scale from 0 to 10.

## Human Flourishing Scores by Confession Participation

**Figure 23.**  
n = 1,132

Note: The typical U.S. benchmark of ~7.1 is based on published findings from the Harvard Human Flourishing Program.

Line shows % scoring 8, 9, or 10



## How Flourishing Differs Across Confession Participation Groups

Across these measures, a clear pattern emerges. Catholics who participate more frequently in Confession report higher average flourishing scores. Confess Regularly participants report the highest overall flourishing, followed by Confess Occasionally participants, with somewhat lower scores among Haven't Been in a While and Went as a Child Participants.

The differences in average scores are modest but consistently directional. More striking is the share of respondents reporting very high flourishing. Confess Regularly participants are noticeably more likely to score at the highest levels of the scale (8, 9, or 10), suggesting a greater concentration of individuals experiencing strong overall well-being.

## What This Finding Means

These findings do not prove that Confession itself causes higher flourishing. However, they do suggest that participation in the sacrament tends to appear alongside broader patterns of spiritual engagement and personal well-being.

For Church leaders, this connection is important. Confession is often discussed primarily in terms of forgiveness of sin. These results suggest it may also be associated with a wider pattern of spiritual and personal flourishing. In other words, the sacrament may play a role not only in addressing sin, but in supporting the deeper renewal of the human person.

More frequent participation in Confession is associated with higher levels of human flourishing.

# Signs of Hope

Despite widespread concern about declining participation in Confession, this study reveals several encouraging signs.

## Many Catholics have **some experience with the sacrament.**

A substantial share of Catholics report having gone to Confession at some point in their lives, even if they are not currently participating regularly. This prior exposure means that for many Catholics, Confession is not unfamiliar territory.

## Many Catholics **remain open to returning.**

Even among Catholics who are not currently participating, many say they would be willing to return to Confession under the right circumstances. Disengagement from the sacrament is often not final.

## Catholics are **drawn by the central meaning of the sacrament.**

The strongest motivation for Confession is the desire to receive God's forgiveness and mercy. Catholics who participate also report experiencing reassurance of God's love, forgiveness, and interior peace.

## Many **barriers are understandable and addressable.**

The most common obstacles involve hesitation, uncertainty about the process, or lack of habit rather than rejection of the sacrament itself. These barriers may respond to reassurance, encouragement, and clearer explanations of Confession.

## Even **occasional participation produces meaningful spiritual benefits.**

Catholics who go to Confession occasionally report experiencing many of the same spiritual fruits as those who participate regularly.

## What the Findings Suggest

These findings suggest that Confession remains spiritually meaningful for many Catholics even when it is not practiced regularly. Many Catholics remain receptive to the sacrament, even when it is not yet a regular part of their lives.

Many Catholics still believe in the sacrament, many have experienced it personally, and many remain open to returning. At the same time, the findings suggest that lasting renewal may involve more than rediscovering the sacrament itself. It may also require helping Catholics deepen their understanding of sin, personal responsibility, and the broader spiritual practices that sustain sacramental life.



# What Needs Attention

**Together, these patterns suggest that the challenge facing Confession today may not primarily be rejection of the sacrament itself, but the gradual weakening of the spiritual habits and formation that sustain sacramental life.**

## **A diminished sense of personal sin.**

Across several measures, fewer Catholics strongly affirm the idea that individuals are personally accountable for their sins before God. This weakening sense of personal responsibility may make the sacrament feel less necessary in everyday life.

## **Uncertainty about the sacrament itself.**

Many Catholics express hesitation about what to say in Confession, how the sacrament works, or whether their sins are serious enough to bring forward. These forms of uncertainty often appear alongside emotional discomfort.

## **The weakening of sacramental habits.**

For many Catholics, participation in Confession appears to be shaped less by theological disagreement and more by the absence of habit. Without a regular rhythm of participation, the sacrament gradually fades from spiritual practice.

## **Childhood experience without adult continuation.**

For some Catholics, Confession was primarily part of their religious life during childhood but did not continue into adulthood. This pattern suggests that early exposure to the sacrament does not always translate into sustained adult participation.

## **Weaker integration into broader spiritual life.**

Participation in Confession appears closely connected to other spiritual practices. Catholics who regularly pray, read Scripture, or engage in other forms of spiritual formation are significantly more likely to participate in the sacrament.



# Pastoral Reflection

Fr. John Riccardo  
on Confession and  
the Mercy of God

**H**ow deeply grateful I am that such a study on the sacrament of confession has been conducted! As both a confessee and a confessor I find the results both encouraging and confirming of my own experience. Upon deeper reflection, three practical takeaways struck me as a priest. First, prioritizing the basic preaching of the gospel. Second, finding new ways to speak about the reality of sin. Third, helping people who've been away from the sacrament to overcome as best we can the feelings of embarrassment or awkwardness. Let me address the first of these at some length, and then offer some much briefer remarks on the last two.

This study reminded me of something I heard more than three decades ago: "Every priest," the person offered, "only has one homily." I was a bit taken aback when I first heard that. After 30 years

of preaching, I now wholeheartedly agree. More importantly, I think we could make the argument that Jesus only has one homily too. He is, after all, the one, true priest, with the rest of us sharing in His priesthood, whether through the priesthood of the baptized or the priesthood of the ordained, or both.

What might Jesus' one homily be? I think you could make the argument that His one homily is His Father. Jesus speaks explicitly about His Father in the Gospels over 180 times. If I were to daringly offer a title to His one homily I might suggest this: "You're wrong about Him." In other words, the life, teaching, ministry and above all passion of Jesus reveal to us that our image of God is quite frankly wrong. How can it not be, for so many reasons? Why is this so important? It's important because the enemy of the human race, the devil, has one primary "homily" as well. The Catechism reminds us that behind the disobedient choice of our first parents in Eden lies a "seductive voice" (cf. n. 391). At the heart of this seductive voice is the lie that God is not a good Father, that He cannot be trusted, and that we can be happier apart from Him. Unfortunately, our first parents fell prey to this lie, and as a result unknowingly sold our race into slavery to the powers of Sin and Death. Thanks be to God that is not the last word!

Jesus' parable commonly known as the "Prodigal Son" is arguably the greatest of His teachings on the Father. What, though, if the parable was instead known as "The Parable of the Father Who Runs to You"? Given that roughly half of those who are not currently going to confession say that receiving God's mercy and forgiveness would move them a great deal toward going, how much of a difference would this make? My experience tells me it can make a tremendous difference.

One of the jaw-dropping details that often eludes us in the parable is the line "when his father caught sight of him he ran to him." Why is this jaw-dropping? Because contrary to our workout-culture, Middle Eastern men at the time of Jesus didn't run. Children run. Poor people run. Slaves run. Not men, at least not wealthy men. It's undignified. It's beneath them. "Your Father," Jesus reveals to us, "runs to you — no matter what you have done, no matter how often." He is not harsh, cruel, or wanting to punish. Instead, He is rich in mercy and loves to forgive.

This study on the sacrament of confession would seem to confirm that more than any other pastoral task in inspiring and motivating people to receive both God's mercy and the grace that comes in this great gift, facilitating an encounter with the God who is love is at the top of the list. A wise man once wrote that you can't bend cold iron; it has to first be warmed. Once warmed, though, you're able to shape it in all sorts of directions. He was talking about our hearts. Our hearts are often like cold steel, meaning they haven't really encountered experientially the love of God. Perhaps they have repeatedly heard that God loves them, but in my experience as a priest most people genuinely don't know it in their hearts. Once they do, however, everything changes.

Again, it would seem the responses offered by those interviewed confirms what Pope John Paul II once wrote about the imperative of preaching the kerygma, that is the core content of what the Father has done for us in Jesus. The late Holy Father said that the initial ardent proclamation of the kerygma should be such that a person is gradually overwhelmed and moved to entrust their life to Jesus in faith (cf. *Catechesi tradendae*, 25). Has this having been overwhelmed happened for

most people in most parishes across the country? I would argue it hasn't.

In an audience with the priests of Rome, Pope Leo XIV reminded them of the need to beware of administering the sacraments without other forms of evangelization. He further encouraged them to make the preaching of the Gospel their priority, for how, citing St. Paul, can people believe in Him of whom they've never heard? This is good news for us who preach! While there is no "silver bullet" to foster a return to confession, joyfully proclaiming what the Father who is rich in mercy has done for us in His Son, allowing people to be overwhelmed anew, and shattering the lies of the enemy does in fact draw many people back to the Father's house.

Second, and much briefer, the results of this study make clear that there is a lack of understanding about sin. There is, then, a need not only for us all to better understand it but maybe even more why it is that God hates it. I personally found that a "lightbulb" went off when I came to see that God hates sin for one reason: because it's harmful to me and to others. And He loves us so much that, like a good parent, He doesn't want to see us hurt ourselves, or others. The commandments of God, then, are not impositions on our freedom, but rather gifts from the God who created us so that we can genuinely flourish and have abundant life. Of course, given the culture we're living in, where nearly everything is tolerated, it might take some teaching and preaching on why certain behaviors are in fact harmful to ourselves and/or to others, but we should eagerly embrace this opportunity.

Third, and finally, the results herein offer priests an encouragement to remove the easiest of barriers which is the awkwardness people often feel about not knowing what to do, or the awkwardness of saying out loud their sins. I would argue that, in

fact, everybody "goes to confession." They just don't go to a priest. People make confessions to their therapists and counselors, to their doctors, to good friends and to more. They just don't receive the gift that is absolution. There is, in fact, a felt need in most of us to express our sorrow and sadness over what we might have said or done. When acknowledged, most people recognize this in themselves. If, however, you haven't frequented the sacrament of confession in some time, one of the reasons you might continue to stay away is the understandable fear or awkwardness associated with not knowing what to do. Thanks be to God, this can be easily addressed in countless ways, including through preaching on it at Mass, or perhaps by utilizing media that "role-play" a person going to confession. We created such a video at a parish where I once served, showing a fictitious confession with someone who hadn't gone to confession in over ten years and didn't know what to do or say. It bore immediate fruit and helped to remove the fears many people had, and led many to return to receive the forgiveness and mercy for which they longed.

Again, how grateful I am for this worthwhile study. I pray it will lead those of us who are responsible for preaching and teaching the faith to consider what the Lord is inviting us to do in our own concrete circumstances to better help our brothers and sisters be able to leave the burden of sin and shame behind and begin again.

### **Fr. John Riccardo**

Founder & Executive Director,  
ACTS XXIX

**“This study is an **invaluable tool** for understanding how Catholics experience Confession today and how we can better invite them back.”**

**Rev. James M. Cox**  
St. Mary | Schwenksville, PA

**“I was just looking for this kind of data a few months ago. It’s **exactly what pastors need** to better understand their people.”**

**Fr. Derek Mobilio**  
Our Lady of the Angels | Worcester, MA

**“To reach the people in the pews, this kind of insight is **incredibly helpful**.”**

**Fr. Boniface Endorf, O.P.**  
Church of St. Joseph in Greenwich Village  
New York, NY

**“Priests learn to act on their instincts and on the opinions of those around them rather than looking at good data. But this is a mistake. Good information like this report helps to organize pastoral conversations and give **evidence-based reasons for making changes** in a parish. It also helps to target key groups within the parish rather than focusing on the same people all the time.”**

**Fr. Eric Banecker**  
Saint Mary Magdalen | Media, PA

**“The study itself is trying to do something valuable: **move the conversation beyond statistics** about declining confession, understand why Catholics are not going, and identify pastoral opportunities. What I like about the study is that it confirms what I already sense—people have not rejected confession and that many are open to returning. I feel the barriers are embarrassment, misunderstanding, and a lack of habit. As a parish pastor, I found the study both **encouraging and pastorally insightful**. Too often discussions about the Sacrament of Reconciliation focus only on declining participation, but this research helps illuminate the deeper spiritual and pastoral realities behind those patterns.”**

**Fr. John Henderson**  
St. Anthony Parish | Tigard, OR

**“Having good data makes decisions easier. Having data on the faithful’s understanding of the sacramental life of the Church is **key to making decisions on homilies, teaching, and practice of the sacraments**.”**

**Pastor**  
Des Moines, IA

**“For a long time, we’ve sensed that the extent to which parents exercise their faith has a huge influence on whether their children engage their faith. The correlation demonstrated in this study between this generational participation compels us to **redouble our efforts in adult faith formation**, particularly having parents receive sacramental formation alongside their children.”**

Anonymous

**“I haven’t seen a study like this before—especially not with so much detail. I think that priests, parishes, and dioceses can really use this information for drawing people back to the Sacrament of Confession.”**

Anonymous Pastor

**“We have a wonderful tool in the sacrament, but we are losing it—we need a refreshing way to talk about our call to be holy. The Lord’s words in the New Testament are more valuable today than only the Ten Commandments from the time of Moses. **To receive the sacrament is not convenient for Catholics anymore.** The teaching on how to reflect and confess almost seems juvenile and not crucial to human conduct. Please continue this study.”**

Anonymous Pastor

**“I find this study very valuable and would definitely like to see more. Whether the laity read them or not, I as a pastor personally found this study very helpful in the insights it gave me to **grow the number of those going to Confession.** Great work!”**

Anonymous Pastor

**“Studies like this are important for the solid data provided. Rather than a broad strokes ‘no one comes to confession anymore’ anecdote, studies like this **break open what’s really going on** and show that there is far more positive actually happening than we realize.”**

Anonymous Pastor

**“Too often I presume to know why people are not coming to confession. This study **gave me some new insights** into what might be done to increase participation in this wonderful Sacrament.”**

Anonymous Pastor

# Question 18

**Confess Regularly** Even people who go to Confession regularly can face challenges or obstacles. Thinking about your own experience, to what extent does each of the following play a role in making it harder for you to go to Confession?

**Confess Occasionally** People who go to Confession sometimes still have reasons they do not go more often. Thinking about your own experience, to what extent does each of the following play a role in why you do not go to Confession more often?

**Haven't Been in a While / Went as a Child** People have different reasons for not going to Confession. Thinking about your own experience, to what extent does each of the following play a role in why you do not go to Confession?

All compacted to T2B: "Significant role" or "Major role"

Group	Shorthand	Original Text	Total Sample n = 1,132	Confess Regularly n = 343	Confess Occasionally n = 172	Haven't Been in a While n = 474	Went as a Child n = 143
Theological	I can ask God directly without needing priest	I feel like I can ask God for forgiveness directly in prayer without needing to go to a priest	63%	53%	46%	70%	81%
Theological	Taking advantage of mercy	I sometimes feel like I'm taking advantage of God's mercy by confessing the same sins again and again	38%	39%	35%	40%	36%
Theological	I feel unworthy of forgiveness	I sometimes feel that my sins or life situation make me unworthy of God's forgiveness	36%	43%	28%	35%	33%
Theological	My sins not serious enough	I don't think my sins are serious enough to require going to Confession	35%	29%	30%	39%	38%
Theological	I'm not ready to change	I'm not ready to deal with some of the changes Confession would call me to make	28%	30%	23%	28%	28%
Habit	I don't think about going without prompts	I don't really think about going to Confession unless something specific prompts me to go	48%	37%	56%	53%	48%
Habit	It never became a habit	I didn't grow up going to Confession regularly, so it never became a habit for me	35%	30%	28%	37%	43%
Personal discomfort	I'm embarrassed or ashamed to speak sin	I feel embarrassed or ashamed talking about my sins out loud	46%	40%	41%	50%	52%
Personal discomfort	Confession is uncomfortable or stressful	I find the process of Confession uncomfortable or stressful	44%	32%	34%	53%	54%
Personal discomfort	I fear being judged	I worry about being judged, misunderstood, or thought less of by the priest	31%	31%	24%	33%	36%
Uncertainty	Fear of "doing it wrong"	I worry that I won't know what to say or that I might do Confession incorrectly	37%	33%	30%	41%	39%
Uncertainty	I'm unsure what to confess	I'm not sure what kinds of sins the Church expects people to bring to Confession	29%	32%	20%	30%	30%
Uncertainty	Confidentiality concerns	I worry that what I say in Confession might not remain fully confidential	23%	26%	16%	25%	19%
Uncertainty	I'm unsure how it works	I'm not fully sure how Confession works or what to expect when I go	23%	25%	16%	25%	23%
Practical	Scheduling inconvenience	Confession times are inconvenient or hard to fit into my schedule	34%	36%	28%	36%	26%
Practical	Past negative experience	Past negative experiences in Confession made me hesitant to go.	20%	22%	13%	23%	16%

# Question 19/20

**Confess Regularly / Occasionally** People go to Confession for different reasons. Thinking about your own experience, to what extent does each of the following play a role in why you go to Confession?

*Compacted to T2B: "Significant role" or "Major role"*

**Haven't Been in a While / Went as a Child** People who do not go to Confession have different perspectives on it. Thinking about your own perspective, to what extent would each of the following move you toward going to Confession?

*Compacted to T2B: "Quite a bit" or "A great deal"*

Group	Shorthand	Original Text: Confess Regularly / Confess Occasionally	Original Text: Haven't Been in a While / Went as a Child	Total Sample n = 1,210	Confess Regularly n = 340	Confess Occasionally n = 172	Haven't Been in a While n = 474	Went as a Child n = 143
Mercy & Salvation	To receive God's forgiveness and mercy	I want to receive God's forgiveness and mercy	Receiving God's forgiveness and mercy	78%	82%	85%	77%	68%
Mercy & Salvation	To be in a state of Grace for Communion	I want to be in a state of grace so I can receive Communion worthily	Being in a state of grace so I can receive Communion worthily	65%	75%	70%	62%	47%
Mercy & Salvation	Out of concern for my eternal salvation	Concern about my eternal salvation (heaven and hell) motivates me to go to Confession	Concern about my eternal salvation (heaven and hell)	63%	68%	69%	63%	57%
Interior Peace & Healing	My interior peace and freedom from burden of sins	Going to Confession gives me a deep sense of interior peace and freedom from the burden of my sins	Experiencing a deep sense of peace and freedom from the burden of my sins	68%	71%	75%	68%	56%
Interior Peace & Healing	Healing where I struggle or feel wounded	Confession brings healing to areas of my life where I struggle or feel wounded	Experiencing healing in areas of my life where I struggle or feel wounded	64%	68%	73%	62%	55%
Interior Peace & Healing	Strength to resist temptation	Confession gives me spiritual strength to resist temptation and sin	Receiving spiritual strength to resist temptation and sin	60%	73%	61%	56%	50%
Catholic Identity & Rhythms	Important part of being Catholic	It is an important part of being Catholic	Seeing Confession as an important part of being Catholic	57%	77%	69%	48%	36%
Catholic Identity & Rhythms	Seasonal prompts	Certain seasons or moments (e.g., Lent, Advent, or life events) prompt me to go	Certain seasons or moments (e.g., Lent, Advent, or life events)	49%	55%	63%	46%	37%
Catholic Identity & Rhythms	Reconciliation with the Church	Going to Confession reconciles me with the Church (not just God personally)	Being reconciled with the Church (not just forgiven personally by God)	49%	58%	47%	47%	38%
Growth & Moral Formation	Spiritual or moral guidance from priest	I receive spiritual or moral guidance from the priest during Confession	Receiving spiritual or moral guidance from a priest	54%	69%	57%	50%	36%
Growth & Moral Formation	Naming sins out loud	Naming my sins out loud helps make them real and motivates me to change	Naming my sins out loud as a way of taking them seriously and motivating change	48%	60%	52%	43%	33%
Growth & Moral Formation	Avoid repeating sins	Confession helps me avoid repeating the same sins in the future	Avoiding repeating the same sins in the future	52%	62%	46%	47%	48%

# Question 21

**Confess Regularly / Occasionally** People experience Confession in different ways. Thinking about your own experience, to what extent do you experience each of the following, if at all, as a result of going to Confession?

Compacted to T1B: "A great deal"

Group	Shorthand	Original Text	Total Sample n = 1,132	Confess Regularly n = 343	Confess Occasionally n = 172
Encounter with Mercy	Knowledge of being forgiven by God	I know that I have been forgiven by God	61%	62%	59%
Encounter with Mercy	Feel reassured of God's mercy	I feel reassured of God's love and mercy	60%	62%	54%
Encounter with Mercy	Healing of wounds	Confession brings healing to areas of my life where I've felt wounded or discouraged	49%	55%	35%
Interior Renewal	A renewed faith	I feel renewed or refreshed in my faith after going to Confession	52%	53%	50%
Interior Renewal	Feeling uplifted or encouraged	I feel uplifted or encouraged after going to Confession	51%	52%	50%
Interior Renewal	Lasting peace	I experience a deep sense of peace that stays with me afterward	49%	51%	46%
Spiritual Strength & Growth	A renewed desire to live the faith	Confession renews my desire to live out my faith more openly and intentionally	48%	53%	38%
Spiritual Strength & Growth	Joy	I feel a genuine sense of joy when I leave the confessional	47%	49%	44%
Spiritual Strength & Growth	Confidence to change	Confession increases my confidence in my ability to change my life	45%	49%	35%
Transformation Toward Others	Greater willingness to forgive	I feel more inclined to forgive others after receiving forgiveness myself	41%	43%	37%
Transformation Toward Others	Desire to share Christ's love	I feel a greater desire to bring Christ's love into the world through my words and actions	41%	45%	33%
Transformation Toward Others	Treating others better	Confession positively affects how I treat other people	36%	40%	29%

# Question 26

**Given where you are today, how helpful, if at all, would each of the following be in helping you go to Confession more often?**

*Compacted to T2B: "A lot" or "Tremendously"*

Group	Shorthand	Original Text	Total Sample n = 1,132	Confess Regularly n = 343	Confess Occasionally n = 172	Haven't Been in a While n = 474	Went as a Child n = 143
Reassurance & Encouragement	Hearing it's normal to struggle with the same sins	Hearing that it's normal to struggle with the same sins and still be welcomed in Confession	51%	61%	59%	46%	33%
Reassurance & Encouragement	Priests emphasizing mercy over judgment	Hearing priests speak more often about God's mercy rather than judgment in Confession	51%	64%	56%	45%	36%
Reassurance & Encouragement	Hearing how Confession helps others	Hearing real-life examples of how Confession has helped other Catholics	43%	58%	43%	37%	25%
Reassurance & Encouragement	Seasonal reminders to go (Lent/Advent)	More reminders or invitation to go to Confession during certain seasons (such as Lent or Advent)	39%	58%	40%	31%	18%
Reassurance & Encouragement	Going with trusted family member or friend	Going to Confession together with a trusted family member or friend (not in the confessional together)	30%	43%	27%	24%	22%
Preparation & Access	Learning how to examine my conscience	Learning how to examine my conscience or prepare for Confession	48%	60%	51%	41%	35%
Preparation & Access	More convenient Confession times	Confession being offered at more convenient times (e.g., weekday evenings, before or after Mass)	47%	62%	50%	40%	29%
Preparation & Access	Opportunities for anonymous Confession	More opportunities for Confession where I don't feel personally known or recognized by the priest	42%	51%	40%	40%	31%
Understanding the Sacrament	Knowing what to expect in Confession	Priests clearly explaining what to expect in Confession and what to say	46%	56%	46%	41%	37%
Understanding the Sacrament	Understanding biblical roots of Confession	Understanding the biblical roots of Confession	44%	59%	42%	38%	30%
Understanding the Sacrament	Confession not only for serious sins	Hearing more clearly that Confession is not only for mortal or serious sins	43%	58%	46%	36%	27%

# CATHOLIC PULSE REPORT

2026

Vinea Research Group is a Catholic nonprofit initiative focused on insights that inform action and support the Church's mission. Guided by more than thirty years of strategic research experience, Vinea helps bring clarity and perspective to Catholic organizations and ministries while contributing to a clearer public understanding of Catholic life.

Its flagship initiative is the Catholic Pulse Report, a national research platform being developed to provide quarterly insights into Catholic life. The Catholic Pulse Report will include three core components:

- 1. U.S. Research** examining Catholic belief, practice, and engagement
- 2. Trends Reports** exploring patterns and emerging themes across key topics
- 3. Global Research** highlighting developments in the worldwide Church

In addition to the Catholic Pulse Report, Vinea Research Group is developing and advancing complementary initiatives that provide deeper insight and practical tools for Catholic leaders, including:

- A Catholic Statistics Dashboard** highlighting key Church metrics
- Deep Dive Alliance Studies** exploring key topics in greater depth
- Catholic Opinion Polling** on major issues
- Custom Research** helping organizations make strategic decisions through commissioned studies

Made possible by  **focus**

This research was made possible through the support of FOCUS.

Organizations and benefactors interested in supporting future Catholic Pulse research are invited to explore opportunities to become founding partners in this ongoing effort. Learn more at [CatholicPulseReport.org](https://CatholicPulseReport.org).



**Hans Plate** directed the research for this report, drawing on more than thirty years of experience in strategic research. Working with the Vinea Research Group team, the study approached the pastoral challenge surrounding Confession with a solutions-oriented approach, seeking to better understand the realities Catholics experience so that efforts to renew the sacrament can be grounded in a clearer and more honest understanding of the issues involved.

The report also benefited from the contributions of advisors and collaborators who helped ensure both methodological rigor and faithful interpretation for the Church.

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We are grateful to all collaborators who contributed their expertise to this work.

**“This study offers an important and thoughtful look at the sacrament of Confession in the lives of Catholics today. It is a great help to those engaged in Church renewal who understand the importance of this sacrament for the life of faith.”**

**Bishop Andrew Cozzens**  
Bishop of Crookston

**“The Catholic Pulse Report provides a striking new lens on participation in Confession. This study highlights the catechetical gaps that must be addressed with clarity and conviction. In doing so, it offers parish leaders both confidence and a practical path forward.”**

**Tim Glemkowski**  
Executive Director, Amazing Parish

**“How deeply grateful I am that such a study on the sacrament of Confession has been conducted. As both a confessee and a confessor I find the results both encouraging and confirming of my own experience.”**

**Fr. John Riccardo**  
Executive Director, Acts XXIX



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