

A Communal Penance Service

LENT

~~LENT~~ is a time for renewing one's life and we cannot renew what we do not understand. If this sounds strange, think of a married couple with relational problems. They may be filled with good will but unable to understand what they are doing to each other. If both step back, perhaps with the help of a counselor, they can reevaluate the entire situation and learn what practical steps they can take to heal their relationship.

Attitudes and Actions

Our lives and their relationship with the Lord are similar. Unless and until we stand back and look at what we are doing, we may continue to live an unrenewed life. In the words of the ancient Greek philosopher, "we must know ourselves."

Thus, the examination of life or examination of conscience is an important exercise in our spiritual growth.

The Sacrament of Penance celebrates this desire to look at our lives and to renew them. Even if you are in a Christian tradition which does not use Penance, much of what is said here can be easily adapted to your teens and their growth patterns.

Planning a Ceremony

1 The beginning of any Penance service is a reassurance that God does love each one of us. This can be accomplished by a reading from the Bible and especially by words of witness from leader of the service.

Then it is necessary to set the tone for an examination, lowered lighting and soft background music are helpful. We suggest a simple reading of the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1-10) as a good way of beginning any examination. Follow this with a prayer for God's help.

2 An examination of life follows. The next page contains a list of questions you can distribute to individuals to help them search through their actions to reflect on their origin and the reasons why each person behaves as he/she does. Read this aloud.

3 Next the group should express sorrow and a resolve to change their lives with the help of the Lord.

4 Private confession to a priest is required by Church law for Catholics. This is an excellent act for it both intensifies the sorrow and gives the individual an opportunity to see him/herself through the eyes of another.

5 Finally, the individuals hear the words of reconciliation with God and with the community. They corporately pray together in sorrow for the past, in thanksgiving for God's loving mercy, and with resolve to help one another in living the Christian life.

All of this is expressed in the Rite of Penance. Remember, however, that the rite is a guide through a profoundly human experience, one that teens can both enjoy and benefit from.

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