

Bishop Clarifies Confession Issue

Bishop Hogan used the WSAY five-station radio hookup last Saturday evening for an address entitled "Private Confession Abolished — Fact or Fiction?" Major excerpts of the talk follow:

I address myself to you in the role of teacher, charged with the responsibility of directing you in the path of truth. St. Paul reminds us of this duty of every bishop in the words of the apostolic charge he addressed to his beloved co-worker, Timothy. "I charge you to preach the word, to stay with this task whether convenient or inconvenient—correcting, reproving, appealing—constantly teaching and never losing patience. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine, but following their own desires, will surround themselves with teachers who tickle their ears. They will stop listening to the truth and will wander off to fables."



Bishop Hogan

This climate of temptation to wander from the truth and to seek out and label as truth only those things which delight our personal fancy (tickle our ears) will be found in every age of the Church. For men are prone to be attracted to the novel, the sensational, and to patterns of conduct which are not so personally demanding — paths of lesser resistance.

The post-Vatican II era has provided such a climate of temptation. The new air of freedom that rushed in when Pope John XXIII opened the windows to let in "fresh air" has awakened an army of sleeping giants — armed with pens and strong and eloquent voices eager to enjoy their new freedom of theological expression.

If all this brings in its wake new enthusiasm for our Christian Commitment, renewed dedication to the Cause of Christ, revitalized spiritual devotion, and a dynamic and concerted effort to transform the world according to God's plan, it comes as a great blessing. Pope Paul VI saw this hopeful blessing of the Council when he said: "The spirit of the Council is fervor, awakening, alertness, good will, spiritual devotion, zeal — new prospects, new hopes, new activities — force and fire."

But great danger also lurks in new-found freedom and that is the possibility that it will be abused and will cause great confusion and uncertainty among our laity, our priests and our religious.

Theological speculation and innovation is not a new phenomenon. The theologian is a man of faith who begins with the deposit of God's revealed truth and labors to make these unchanging truths relevant to all generations. It is, also, within the ambit of his competence and authority to offer theological opinions on the application of revelation to human conduct as long as what he says is clearly labeled as opinion.

Before Vatican II the theologian expressed his ideas quietly to an audience limited by the formidable appearance of the journals in which he wrote. These were scholarly publications subjected to the analysis and investigation of an elite body of fellow scholars before their content ever came to public attention.

With the new freedom and its opportunity for the circulation of fresh ideas and for the reformulation and restatement of ancient truths, a burden has been placed on the ordinary Catholic to begin to carefully sift what he reads. For those of us who have been used to accepting as Gospel truth whatever has been said on matters religious, this requires a power of discernment which has been dormant for want of experience. We are suddenly being asked to live on a hardy diet after years of being used to milk and spoon feeding.

I see my role as one of a leadership more necessary than ever in this age of understandable confusion. More than ever our people need a strong voice to help all of us preserve our balance. It is in this spirit that I speak out tonight about one area of our religious life that has been a matter of deep concern for some time to me and to many of my people — it is the matter of confession and the need for private confession.

Were we to believe what some religious writers feel free to tell us today and if we were to accept wholeheartedly what the secular news media are telling us, we would conclude that private confession has been consigned to the Vatican archives as a relic of the past and that its continued practice has become merely a matter of option.

Unfortunately, too, the reading of many people even on religious matters is confined to a daily scanning of the secular newspapers. A most recent example of such unethical reporting appeared in the New York Times of Jan. 17. The reader was led to believe as fact: "that Pope Paul is considering a reform of confession"; "that the world's bishops had been sent a document asking their opinions on changes in the present discipline of confession"; "that the hallowed practice of confessing one's sins before a priest has swiftly become a thing of the past for a large percentage of Catholics"; "that most observers expect to see a continued drift away from the sacrament of penance."

The simple facts which gave birth to this false reporting were these:

Two Congregations of the Roman Curia have been examining and discussing a working paper that contains, among other things,

some recommendations for extending a 1944 Vatican instruction on the use of general absolution. The Church has for ages recognized general absolution as valid in extraordinary circumstances where the law of integrity (confessing all our mortal sins) would be impossible to fulfill — as, for example, in actual military combat or in isolated missionary areas where individual confessions would present the missionary a hopeless situation.

What then is the truth about the possibility of a new discipline for confession?

It is this — the bishops assembled at the Vatican Council gave official encouragement to the study of a revision of the administration of the Sacrament of Penance. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy expressly declared: (Article 72) "The rite and formulas of the sacrament of penance are to be revised so that they give more luminous expression to both the nature and effect of the sacrament."

I have no doubt that this declaration encouraging revision of the sacramental rite was prompted by deep discouragement in personal and pastoral reflections on experiences of the wide divergence between what the sacrament was intended to accomplish and what it actually was accomplishing in all too many lives.

Catalogs of faults glibly repeated week after week, abstract confessions never seeming to touch the core of our lives — manifesting insensitivity to responsibilities of our vocation in life as wife, husband, member of a family, relationship to our neighbor, to our work — stereotyped confessions memorized in childhood and repeated as evidence of a moral growth frozen at the age of 7 — all common pastoral observations which could lead only to the disturbing conclusion that the confession of sins had become too often a substitute for forsaking them.

We have been waiting seven years now for an official revision of Penance as encouraged by the Vatican Council. Meanwhile the statement of the Council has provided impetus for those engaged in the pastoral ministry to experiment with formats of administration of the sacrament to make confession the meaningful religious experience that more and more seem to be saying they want—if we interpret correctly the significance of their growing refusals to use the traditional form of penance.

Three experimental forms have appeared — all accenting the social dimensions of sin and the communal dimensions of pardon. Let me explain them to you and pass my considered judgment on the value of each:

The first form is really a preparation for the reception of the sacrament and involves prayers, scriptural readings, a homily, an examination of conscience—followed by private confession, private absolution—with a penance to be said privately or with the assembled group. The most conservative thinker could not quarrel with this rite because it simply combines the traditional rite with a bible service.

In fact, it improves on the traditional rite because of the preparation it offers for a fruitful reception of the sacrament and because it emphasizes our membership in the Christian Community and our social responsibilities which flow from this membership.

The second form is more ambitious and somewhat controversial. It represents an attempt to assemble within the space of some 40 minutes the main features of the early Church's 40 days of Lenten penance which led to the public ceremony of reconciliation on Holy Thursday. The readings are taken from the week-day Masses of Lent which were composed with penitents in mind. Readings from the penitential psalms are used to deepen the sense of sin and confidence in God's mercy. The prayers in this form are not so much a preparation for the sacrament of penance, but rather as the external expression of the dispositions of the penitent and thereby are an essential part of the sacrament itself.

This public act of admission of sinfulness in the midst of the Community is then followed by private confession, preferably within sight of the Community—and followed by public intercessory prayers for pardon and concluded with a general absolution.

I personally find no difficulty in accepting this form of penance. It preserves the role of confessor as judge and physician of souls, allows for individual direction for the penitent and at the same time emphasizes the truth that sin is never a totally private affair—but has social dimensions which should require a social form of reconciliation.

This past year priests of the Archdiocese of Detroit received express permission to use this format provided there is individual confession with absolution given individually or in common.

The third format is labelled highly controversial and rightly so. I cannot endorse it and scholars find nothing in the history of the administration of the sacrament to justify it—and this is what the proponents have relied on so heavily. This form would bypass the necessity of any private confession even of serious sins. All would be reconciled by general absolution. And private confession would be purely a matter of option.

This format leaves only to option the role of the confessor as judge of the dispositions of the penitent, his role as director and physician of souls and the admission of personal guilt for a particular act for it requires only the relatively simple admission of a state of sinfulness.

True, it is much easier to say in chorus with a Community, "I am a sinful man, O Lord" than to speak alone to God's representative: "Father, I am guilty of the sin of adultery."

I have yet to experience painless therapy. How about you?

Letters

Critics Seen Slow To Act

Editor:

In response to Larry J. LoMaglio's letter (Courier-Journal 1/20/71) concerning the "deplorably impoverished musical program" that exists in his parish, I have this to say:

The elements Mr. LoMaglio suggests for a full liturgical

program take time, effort and money — which unfortunately few people are willing to give. The ones now involved in the musical program are there because of their love for God and a desire to help. I am sure they, as well as the pastor, would welcome generous, talented people who wish to help promote the "model" liturgical program Mr. LoMaglio so enjoys. In fact, I suggest he be the first to step forth.

I find people quick to criticize, but slow to act.

Mrs. Dominic Gratta
Organist, St. Theodore's

Word for Sunday

Reassert Respect

By FR. ALBERT SHAMON

This Sunday and last night will be titled "Vocation Sunday." Last Sunday we read of the call of Jeremia and of Christ; this Sunday, of Isala and Peter.

Nothing ever happens by chance. Persistent reading of the Scriptures discloses this. God has His hand in everything, especially in matters concerning man's salvation.

Consider the vocation of Isala. At the time of his call, the last year of Uzziah's reign (about 742 B.C.), Israel was at a material high, but at a spiritual low. Uzziah's reign was one of glory. Once again, he gave Israel a taste of Solomonic prosperity and Davidic conquest. Uzziah even dreamed of flaunting the Assyrian colossus. Israel was proud of her king — so proud, in fact, that she lifted up her face, put her hope in him and not in her God.

As for Uzziah himself, prosperity and power made him arrogant and arrogance bred irreverence. In rash pride Uzziah arrogated to himself the priestly function of offering incense in the Holy of Holies. In punishment, God struck Uzziah with leprosy and within a year he died an outcast. Israel plunged into gloom. What hope had she now against Assyria?

In this context we must interpret Isala's vocatory vision. God appears as a King on a lofty throne to remind Israel of her rightful King. Israel had let Uzziah's glory eclipse the glory of Jaweh. She needed to learn once again who her God was. Isala was picked to teach her, and the seraphim were chosen to teach Isala.

The seraphim are angels closest to the throne of God. As fire makes fire of any object that touches it, so the seraphim in touch with the burning glory of God are themselves flaming spirits, burning with the fire of divine love. For seraphim means "the burning ones."

These "burning ones" teach Isala a lesson he never forgets — the lesson of God's holiness and the reverence due Him. Like two choirs, they chant antiphonally, not what God does, but what God is — "Holy, Holy, Holy." And because He is, they show what profound reverence is due Him by covering themselves with four of their six wings. Two cover their faces to point out the folly of lifting up one's face against God. Two cover their feet to teach man not to dare to rush in where angels fear to tread, even though one be a king as mighty as Uzziah.

God is holy and everything that touches God, like the seraphim, becomes holy — His Church, His name, His people. Yet we see an epidemic of irreverence today. Irreverence toward the Blessed Sacrament, the holy name, and the human body, that temples the Holy Spirit.

The enemies of God gloat over — yes, encourage — irreverence. The Communist Manual of Instructions of Psychopolitical Warfare, the book used in America for the training of Communist cadre, has a chapter on degradation. I quote a few sentences. "Degradation and conquest are companions. In order to be conquered a nation must be degraded. Degradation can be accomplished by constant and continual defamations."

Does not Isala have a pertinent message today? Are we not called once again to reassert respect, reverence for religion, for the Church, for God's holy name and, now especially, for the human person? The fate of Israel hung on its reverence for God. So does the fate of any other nation.

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MAIN OFFICE 35 Scio St. — 454-7050 — Rochester, N. Y. 14604
ELMIRA OFFICE 317 Robinson Bldg., Lake St. — RE 2-5688 or RE 2-3423



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