

Insights in Liturgy

The Easy Way Out?

By FATHER ROBERT J. KENNEDY

The celebration of the Rite for Reconciliation of Penitents with General Confession and Absolution raises many pastoral concerns. How often is it permissible? What about serious sins? Isn't it the easy way out?

As we wrote last week, this third form of the sacrament of Penance is seen to be exceptional, celebrated in "particular occasional circumstances" determined by the local bishop or, in cases of emergency, by the reconciling minister. This means first of all, that the Rite with General Confession and Absolution will not be celebrated regularly, but only in those times and

situations when the number of available confessors is insufficient to celebrate an individual form of Penance adequately, resulting in the delay of sacramental reconciliation and the reception of Holy Communion. In addition, "penitents must resolve individually to confess their serious sins at least within a year, unless this is morally impossible."

These conditions raise further problems because they are sufficiently ambiguous to allow either a more liberal or a more conservative interpretation. What is the best way to deal with this?

First, this form of celebration of Penance must be seen in the fuller context of God's mercy and forgiveness, of conversion in

the Christian life, and of the communal aspects of the sacrament. This calls for good, solid catechesis on the "mystery of reconciliation, the meaning of sin and the rites themselves, and will eliminate the "slot machine" mentality about this form of the sacrament.

Second, Bishop Hogan's guidelines on the implementation of the Rite of Penance suggest several occasions or situations when priests may use General Confession and Absolution: "one-priest" areas, resort areas, or on special family, parish or community occasions. Also, the seasons of Advent and Lent are appropriate times for such celebrations since the number of penitents wishing to be reconciled usually increases and there is a greater demand on the priests' time. While every effort must be made to provide individual reconciliation, it may be appropriate to schedule the Rite of General Confession and Absolution in these penitential seasons.

Some might consider this the "easy way out." There is certainly no doubt that it is a difficult process to face up to our weakness, our failure, our sin. But the Rite of Reconciliation with General Confession and Absolution is no magic act which reconciles us in the wink of an eye. It presupposes a contrite spirit on the part of the penitent, a humbled heart produced by honest personal efforts at bringing one's life back into line with the Gospel's call. This Rite as with every form of the Sacrament of Penance is the summit of our efforts to be reconciled with God and neighbor and it serves as the source of our ongoing conversion, expressed by a life more and more steeped in the love of God.

This is why Advent and Lent are good times for this form of Penance: there has been a good amount of time spent in renewing our lives according to the Gospel message, and we can come with something to celebrate, we can worship the Lord for his steadfast mercy toward us.

Finally, the greatest pastoral concern of all is that the Church continue the ministry of reconciliation in the way Jesus did. We must preach the challenging Word of God in a way that the Christian People may see clearly the direction of their own hearts, but we must also provide a welcome place for them to be unburdened. This will make the celebration of the sacrament in whatever form a joyous prayer of thanks for the mercy of God.

pilgrim searching. "I do not think of myself as having reached the finish line" (a phrase borrowed from the Greek mystery religions). The Christian is a pilgrim; the Church, a pilgrim Church.

Paul's idea of a pilgrim Church is especially timely today. We are now emerging from a period in which stable institutions, unchangeable truths and absolute authority could have created the impression that "we have arrived" — that God's kingdom is already a reality. But now with the massive dechristianization going on, with so much being questioned, it is quite evident that we have not arrived.

And this is good. For instead of being a people in possession, we are a people in pilgrimage. The fact that God's people were a pilgrim people in the desert is a good reminder and can help restore some tranquility to those disquieted by all the post-Vatican II changes.

In the gospel incident, the Scribes and the Pharisees image the pre-Vatican II Church — the Church that "had arrived," that was unalterable, that seemed to put law above persons, acts above life.

Perhaps it was St. Luke, and not St. John, who authored the story of the adulteress. It could have been a midrash on the Susanna story (Dan. 13). In the Susanna story, the woman accused by two old men is innocent of adultery and is saved by the prophet Daniel. In the gospel story, the Scribes and Pharisees are the old men and Jesus is the new Daniel. But there is this difference: the woman is not innocent; she is truly an adulteress. Daniel vindicated an innocent woman, but Jesus a guilty one. The point is that Jesus was ushering in a new era, one of grace and pardon.

The Law judged acts, Jesus judges persons. The adulteress represents us: sinners. Like her, we can transcend sin and accept the chance encounter and dialogue offered by Christ. Thus we can be led to sin no more, can be freed from the Law, and learn to obey a conscience that has known love. "See, I am doing something new."

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WORD FOR SUNDAY. Fr. Albert Shamon. Sunday's Readings: (R3) In. 8:1-11. (R1) Is. 43:16-21. (R2) Phil. 3:8-14. Second Isaiah (R1) had arrived at one of the clearest concepts of the oneness and uniqueness of the God. Because he had, he saw unity in history. He had a God-view of history that perceived all events (past, present, or future) as carrying the stamp of the one God, which was the liberation of all mankind! Thus he sought to foretell the future by reference to the past.

Accordingly, Second Isaiah interpreted the future of his people, languishing in the Babylonian Captivity, by looking back to the Egyptian Exodus. He foresaw their liberation as a new Exodus. "See, I am doing something new."

In a similar fashion, Christians viewed Jesus' intervention into history in the light of the Exodus. They too saw His life, death, resurrection and ascension as a new "exodus," a new liberation, not from physical slavery, but from the spiritual slavery of sin.

St. Paul (R2) warns that this liberation is not to be effected through knowledge, albeit a knowledge of Christ. Three times he speaks of knowledge, for he was rebutting gnosticism — a heresy teaching Jewish Christians that perfection could be found in knowledge. Paul admits that the only thing worth knowing is Jesus Christ. But for Paul this knowledge of Christ is not a purely intellectual thing, but an experiential matter, not just a theory, but a life — a sharing in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Hence there is no arriving in the Christian life. The end of striving ends only at the end of life.

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THE OPEN WINDOW. Fr. Louis Hohman. Dear Father Hohman, Recently I read the following item from Religious News Service (2-14-77): "A Trappist Monk has called for new educational efforts by the Catholic Church to show that cremation, as opposed to burial by interment in the ground, is not contrary to Church teachings, natural law or divine law."

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"A Trappist Monk has called for new educational efforts by the Catholic Church to show that cremation, as opposed to burial by interment in the ground, is not contrary to Church teachings, natural law or divine law."

While noting that ground burial for deceased Catholics is still preferred, Father Aidan Carr, OCSO, of Monck's Corner, S.C., said that since 1970 the Catholic Church has permitted cremation without authorization from Church officials. The change rules out cremation only when it is used as an "anti-Christian gesture." Can you enlighten me on this subject?

Signed, T.M. Dear T.M.,

Most of us in pastoral ministry have been under the impression that the Vatican did not want it generally, preached that cremation was an available alternative for Catholics. However, we were instructed, that those who asked for it should be allowed to have it along with Christian burial.

As you probably know the reasons against cremation were simply that certain groups used it as a sign of disbelief in the resurrection of the body and for that reason it was condemned by Pope Boniface VIII in the year 1299. Since cremation no longer carries with it that kind of signification, the prohibition of it is no longer necessary.

As Religious News Service points out, the current regulations authorize cremation after a funeral Mass and provide for the rites which normally take place in a cemetery chapel or at a graveside to be carried out in a crematorium.

One last reminder — the Church still does regard ground burial as the preferred method. Probably in the not too distant future ground burial will be quite impractical in view of lack of space in many congested areas of the world.

BISHOP VISITS. Moravia—Bishop Joseph L. Hogan recently administered the Sacrament of Confirmation at St. Patrick's Church on a class of 53 persons. Prior to the ceremonies, women of the parish prepared and served dinner to the bishop. Father Gerard McMahon, pastor; Father William Gaynor, former pastor who is now retired, and several other clergymen.

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