

# Pope Calls for Confession Disciplines

Vatican City (RNS)—Pope John Paul II, urging respect for the Church's "sacred discipline," underscored the "importance" of having children make their first confession of sins before receiving their first Holy Communion.

At an audience with a group of Canadian bishops, in Rome for their quinquennial report on their dioceses, the Pope also insisted on strict observance of the norms for "General Absolution," and called for renewed observance of the practice of "frequent" individual sacramental confession.

The questions of "First Confession" and of the administration of general sacramental absolution have been topics of some debate and controversy in recent years in the Church.

In the early 1970s, two or three-year experiments — routinely deferring reception of the sacrament of Penance until after the first reception of Communion — were in effect in a number of dioceses in the United States and Canada. In 1973, the Vatican Congregations for the Discipline of the Sacraments and for the Clergy, with the approval of Pope Paul VI, ordered an end to all such experimentation.

One reason stated in support of the experiments was the view that children are not capable of serious sin at the age of seven or eight, when Communion is generally received for the first time, and therefore, prior reception of the sacrament of Penance is not necessary.

Referring to these experiments, Pope John Paul said "After some initial experimentation had been conducted, Pope Paul VI in 1973 reiterated the discipline of the Latin Church in regard to First Communion." (This discipline was set down by Pope St. Pius X in 1910.)

"With exemplary fidelity," said Pope John Paul, "numerous bishops, priests, deacons, religious teachers, and catechists set out to explain the importance of the discipline, which the supreme authority of the Church had confirmed, and to apply it to the benefit of the faithful."

"I am grateful to you for your own vigilance in this regard and ask you to continue to explain the Church's solicitude in maintaining this universal discipline, so rich in doctrinal background and confirmed by the experience in so many local churches."

"With regard to children

who have reached the age of reason, the Church wishes to experience the sacramental expression of conversion before being initiated into the Eucharistic sharing of the Paschal mystery," the pontiff said.

Pope John Paul then turned to the question of what he called "conversion in its sacramental aspect of individual confession," and of the need to observe Church norms regarding general absolution.

Again referring to the teaching of Paul VI, Pope John Paul said the late pontiff had, in a talk with bishops, insisted on the "exceptional character" of general absolution and had urged priests to have an ever greater appreciation of their role as confessors.

General absolution is sacramental absolution given to groups without individual confession of sin, when such is impossible, as, for example in time of war or similar catastrophe. Persons so absolved are required to confess, in their next individual confession, the mortal sins from which they were so absolved.

(In 1976, Bishop Carroll T. Dozier of Memphis, Tenn., held unprecedented rites featuring a combination of general sacramental absolution

with the celebration of Mass — in a "Call to Reconciliation" of members of the Church, especially those who were alienated from it for whatever reason.

(Convoking and celebrating reconciliation rites with general sacramental absolution in the setting of the Mass were rejected as inappropriate by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1977.)

Pope John Paul II did not specifically refer to the Dozier case, but the tenor

of his remarks made it clear that he would not approve of such ritual.

In his talk to the Canadian prelates, Pope John Paul laid great stress on the importance of the frequency of individual, private sacramental confession of sins.

He said that priests might have to postpone or even abandon other duties, but "not the confessional."

"I thank you for what you have done and will do to show the importance of the Church's wise

discipline in an area that is so intimately linked with the work of reconciliation in the name of the Lord Jesus," he said.

"Let us give assurance in union with the whole Church to all our priests of the great supernatural effectiveness of persevering ministry exercised through auricular (private) confession, in fidelity to the command of the Lord and the teachings of the Church. And once again, let us assure all our people of the great benefits derived from frequent confession."



After an unexpected chat with Pope John Paul II, during a weekly Vatican audience, a delighted youngster is treated to another surprise as the pontiff lifts him high above his head, delighting the crowd. (RNS)

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