

THE POPE

# Pontiff Asks Bishops to Stress Penance Rites

Vatican City (NC) — The following is excerpted from the text of Pope John Paul II's English-language address to the bishops of New York and the U.S. Military Ordinariate April 15 during their recent "ad limina" visit to Rome.

It is a great joy for me to welcome you as the first group of American bishops making your "ad limina" visit in this Holy Year of the Redemption. I wish to tell you immediately how close I feel to the faithful of the New York region and of the Military Ordinariate and to all the faithful of the United States, who are very much in my thoughts and prayers. But I wish to emphasize above all my spiritual union with you, my brother bishops.



I am sure that all of you, like me, find special strength in our meeting today, because, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are attaining the episcopal collegiality of the Church. For you, moreover, it is right and just to know that you do not work and toil alone. You are supported by the successor of Peter and the entire college of bishops.

Today I wish to reflect with you on our common mission as bishops: to proclaim Jesus Christ, the redeemer and reconciler of humanity. I wish to do so within the double context of the Holy Year of the Redemption and the forthcoming Synod of Bishops that has as its theme: "Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church." In my letter last Jan. 25 to the bishops of the Church, I endeavored to point out how these two events are intimately linked: "Reconciliation," I wrote, "is simply the redemption that the Father has offered to every human being in the death and resurrection of his Son. And he continues to offer it today to all sinners as he awaits, like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, their repentant return through conversion."

The synod, linked to the holy year, will seek ways of more effectively proclaiming the reconciliation of the redemption and of eliciting from the faithful a response of conversion and penance to God's call; and we can be sure that the synod will bring immense insights to its collegial task. But already as bishops we have the task every day of proclaiming reconciliation according to the rich apostolic patrimony of the Church. Ours is truly, in the expression of St. Paul, "the ministry of reconciliation."

And today I would propose for your consideration this ministry of reconciliation in all its implications. We are truly called to proclaim the reconciliation of humanity with God. This means reviving a sense of God, of his word, of his commandments — of the need for accepting his will as the real criterion for human action. Proclaiming reconciliation means reviving a sense of sin among our people; this in turn can lead us to recognize the roots of human responsibility in the varied fields of economic, social, historical, cultural and political ills. When man understands his alienation from God, he can begin to perceive how he is in opposition with his brothers and sisters and with creation itself. The proclamation can then become an effective call to peace. Proclaiming reconciliation means insisting on the greatness of God's pardon and on his compassionate love. To offer the response of the redemption to a world made conscious of sin is to proclaim the revelation of mercy and the message of hope which is in "Christ Jesus our hope."

To proclaim reconciliation means in a particular way promoting the Sacrament of Penance. It means stressing the importance of the sacrament as it relates to conversion, to Christian growth, to the very renewal of society, which cannot be healed without the forgiveness of sins. It is our role as bishops to point out that both original sin and personal sin are at the basis of the evils that affect society and that there is a constant conflict between good

and evil, between Christ and Satan. It is salutary for our people to realize that they are involved in the continuation of the paschal conflict — "Mors et vita duello conflixere mirando" — but that they are fortified by the strength of the risen Christ. Only when the faithful recognize sin in their own lives are they ready to understand reconciliation and to open their hearts to penance and personal conversion. Only then are they able to contribute to the renewal of society, since personal conversion is also the only way that leads to the lasting renewal of society. This personal conversion by divine precept is intimately linked to the Sacrament of Penance.

Just five years ago this month Paul VI spoke to the New York bishops during their last "ad limina" visit. With prophetic insistence he emphasized both the importance of conversion and its relationship to the Sacrament of Penance. He stated at that time, "Conversion constitutes the goal to be achieved by our apostolic ministry: to awaken a consciousness of sin in its perennial and tragic reality, a consciousness of its personal and social dimensions, together with a realization that 'grace has far surpassed sin.'" His solicitude for various sacramental aspects is my own today. His words retain their total relevance for the Church in the United States and throughout the world, and I propose them once again to your pastoral zeal and responsibility.

In particular he requested that priests be encouraged by the bishops to give special priority to the ministry of the Sacrament of Penance. He wrote:

"If priests deeply understand how closely they collaborate, through the Sacrament of Penance, with the Savior in the work of conversion, they will give themselves with ever greater zeal to this ministry. More confessors will readily be available to the faithful. Other works, for lack of time, may have to be postponed or even abandoned, but not the confessional."

Our ministry as priests and bishops certainly means that we are called upon to go in search of those who have sinned, so as to invite them to return to the fullness of the Father's love. In doing so, let us hold up hope and proclaim mercy. Let us, together with our priests, concentrate the attention of the faithful on the person of Jesus Christ the redeemer, who personally forgives and reconciles each individual. For the glory of the Father let us encourage our people to understand the great truth that "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." Yes, dear brothers, let us emphasize over and over again the immense value of a personal encounter with the God of mercy through individual confession. Let us, with our people, raise a hymn of praise to "the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God."

In speaking to the group of New York bishops, Paul VI also dealt with the question of general absolution and its proper application. The experience of the universal Church confirms the need on the part of all the bishops for further pastoral vigilance. The new Code of Canon Law points out again the exceptional character of this practice, repeating that general absolution is not envisioned solely because of large numbers of penitents assembled for a great celebration or pilgrimage.

I would ask once again for your zealous pastoral and collegial solicitude to help ensure that these norms, as well as the norms regulating the first confession of children, are understood and properly applied. The treasures of Christ's love in the Sacrament of Penance are so great that children too must be initiated into them. The patient effort of parents, teachers and priests needed to prepare children for this sacrament are of great value for the whole Church.

In this Holy Year of the Redemption I would ask that a whole pastoral program be developed around the Sacrament of Penance and be effected by practical means. This will include a renewed effort at catechesis, so that the sacrament can be made a dynamic part of the lives of young and old alike. Frequent penitential celebrations

including the individual confession and absolution of sins will be a great help to the faithful in grasping better the realities of sin and grace, and in experiencing the great joy of meeting Christ in an encounter of love, mercy and pardon. The availability of confessors, emphasized and publicized in different ways such as church bulletins, can give a great impetus to the faithful to go to confession, since God's grace has already awakened a desire or a need for the sacrament in the hearts of many. Something totally consonant with our priestly and apostolic ministry is for us to invite the faithful repeatedly to reconciliation with God and with the ecclesial community. As pastors, we must be humbly conscious of our weaknesses and our sins and yet, in God's plan of mercy, we have been given the charisma and obligation to call the faithful to repentance and conversion, and to lead the way.

As mentioned in the "Ordo Paenitentiae," the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance is always permitted during any season or on any day. Yet it is particularly appropriate during Lent, so as to prepare the faithful for a fitting celebration of the paschal mystery, the grace of which is so effectively presented to them during the liturgy of the sacred triduum. The faithful are certainly to be encouraged to confess their sins before these last days of Holy Week as a spiritual preparation for them; at the same time this will help to diminish the heavy pressure on confessors. Nevertheless, I would ask that bishops urge their priests to do everything possible in their pastoral generosity and zeal to make confessions available also during the last days of Holy Week. Inevitably there will be people who in spite of everything will need this opportunity of grace. This generous sacrifice on the part of priests will allow them to share even more deeply in the paschal mystery and will be amply rewarded by Christ.

The Holy Year is also an excellent time to help our people reflect on the rich content of the "Our Father" as a prayer of reconciliation: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." By the grace of God and through your apostolic ministry may the Holy Year find the church ever more a reconciling and reconciled community, attentive to the word of God as the criteria according to which the whole "ministry of reconciliation" is applied.

As we pursue our ministry of reconciliation let us always look to both aspects of the person's return to God and conversion. There is no doubt that penance and conversion involve great effort and are sometimes extremely painful. There is no doubt that the word of God is demanding and sometimes the human being is confused in concrete situations which call for much more than human effort and which require humble and persevering prayer. And yet as pastors we must not underestimate the limitless power of Christ's grace nor can we attempt to alter the requirements of the Gospel. We are accountable to Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd for exercising true pastoral compassion and we must not be surprised if the world falsely equates fidelity to the eternal Word of God with insensitivity to human weakness. On the contrary, the redemption touches hearts precisely through the revelation of God's word. What we must do is to give the prophetic example of reconciliation, conversion and penance in our own lives, proclaiming by word and example that Jesus Christ is the only redeemer and reconciler of humanity.

Let us, dear brothers, walk this path together, united with Mary the mother of Jesus and united among ourselves and with the worldwide episcopate. In this great bond of collegiality between all the bishops and the successor of Peter there is strength for your pastoral initiatives and the important guarantee of their supernatural effectiveness. In the ministry of reconciliation, in the dispensation of the mystery of the redemption through the Sacrament of Penance, supernatural effectiveness is of supreme importance. Be convinced, dear brothers, that if we walk together the Lord Jesus will reveal himself to us; he will convert us ever further to his love; he will use us as servant pastors to bring his redemption to the world.

## NCEA Conference Fields Host of Topics

Washington (NC) — Father Henri J.M. Nouwen set the spiritual tone for the National Catholic Educational Association Convention, President Reagan closed it on a political note, and Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago spoke on war and peace, an issue where the spiritual and political intertwine.

A total of almost 10,000 educators attended the NCEA Convention held in Washington April 4-7. Main speakers also included ABC-TV news anchorman Frank Reynolds and Norbertine Father Alfred McBride, acting president of the University of Albuquerque, N.M.

Cardinal Bernardin, who heads the bishops' drafting committee for their proposed war and peace pastoral, said April 5 that the third draft "is skeptical to a point

bordering on disbelief regarding the controlled use of nuclear weapons.

"We never say that every contemplated use of any nuclear weapon would 'ipso facto' be immoral. But we are close to that position because of the severe risk factor involved," the cardinal said.

At a press conference following his convention address, Cardinal Bernardin emphasized that the pastoral is meant as moral teaching and does not endorse any specific political position.

Reagan, rejecting criticism that he is strong on rhetoric supporting tuition tax credit legislation on Capitol Hill but weak on action, told educators April 7 that "like Teddy Roosevelt, I'm going to charge up that hill" to victory.

In his address Reagan said he would "get to the heart of what I know the National Catholic Educational Association is interested in... We need tuition tax credits."

He outlined the education package in Congress but introduced no new proposals. The current proposal includes tax credits for up to half of the tuition parents pay to send their children to non-public schools.

Reagan said he was disappointed that tax credits did not do better in the last Congress and "I want the legislation to move as quickly as possible through Congress" this year.

Father Nouwen, in the first general session of the NCEA April 4, set a spiritual tone with his talk on intimacy, fecundity and ecstasy.

The Christian challenge is to "accept the knowledge that you are loved. Where you live, there is where is the one (God) who loves you," he said.

Reynolds told the Catholic educators that they and he "have a common obligation... to tell the truth as we see it."

Addressing a general session of the NCEA April 6, Reynolds discussed the difficulties TV reporters and editors face as "we try to jam in what we think is significant" in the short time allotted.

"I have an obligation not to mislead. I have to try to avoid creating the wrong impression... about complex and difficult problems," Reynolds said.

Father McBride, echoing the theme of the convention

— "Catholic Education: The Choices and the Challenges" — said April 7 that the greatest choice and hardest challenge is to create a Catholic educational philosophy.

For four centuries the best and brightest have worked in parallel lines without fruitfully helping one another, according to Father McBride.

Today there are some of the best and brightest people in the Church and "we have within the fold the resources of philosophy for creating a coherent world view and a plan for meaning consistent with the Gospel and favorable to our educational goals."

Bishop John S. Cummins of Oakland, Calif., told educators in an April 5 session that non-Catholic

students would be made to feel welcome in Catholic schools without watering down the Church dogmas taught there.

The presence of non-Catholic students in Catholic schools offers an opportunity to teach the Gospel, Bishop Cummins said. Different schools use different approaches when evangelizing students, but "every student should be provided with the opportunity to know Jesus Christ."

Auxiliary Bishop James P. Lyke of Cleveland, speaking on "Catechesis and the Black Community," said the Word of God must permeate each culture and the American Church has the opportunity to discover itself "in the richness of our Christian life in all its varied expressions of cultural traditions."

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