

Bishops Synod Focusing on Penance

General Absolution Seen as Possibly Controversial Issue

By Jerry Filteau
NC News Service

The opening of the sixth world Synod of Bishops at the Vatican last week began a month of intense focus on reconciliation and penance in the Catholic Church.

Six U.S. bishops are among the 221 voting synod members from around the world. One of these, Cardinal Timothy Manning of Los Angeles, is among the three cardinals chosen by Pope John Paul II to take turns presiding over the daily sessions.

The working document which will serve as a takeoff point for synod discussions, coupled with presynod comments on its theme by Church officials from various parts of the world, indicate that the major focus of the meeting will be the sacrament of penance and questions of personal penitence, conversion and reconciliation.

Those topics include some significant controversial issues in the Church that are almost certain to evoke debate. Among these are the concern expressed by many bishops over what they call a loss of the sense of sin, particularly in the affluent

societies of the West; drastic declines in the use of confession and in other penitential practices among Catholics over the past two decades; and divided views on the use of general absolution outside the extraordinary circumstances under which Church norms now permit it.

The synod fathers, as the voting participants are called, are also expected to explore in some depth the biblical and theological perspectives of penance, conversion and reconciliation and the place of these concerns in the Church's overall mission and pastoral ministry. Underlying all the discussions will be the view that reconciliation begins with inner renewal, with a "change of heart" or conversion that fundamentally changes all one's relationships, not only with God but with other persons.

But the working document also suggests for synod discussion a wide range of other topics -- including other potentially controversial ones -- that fall under the overall theme of "Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church."

Reconciliation among nations and within nations, reconciliation among churches and within churches, and reconciliation in families, neighborhoods and parishes, among young or old, at work, and in other areas of human life -- all are fair game for the synod.

Under such headings could come pleadings for new Church efforts for the poor, for international justice and peace, or for the reconciliation and reunification of divided Christianity.

How deeply or extensively the synod might consider those issues, however, remained an open question as the clock for the synod opening wound down.

Several U.S. bishops studying theology in Rome during the month before the synod indicated that general absolution was likely to be one of the meeting's most controversial topics -- at least for Catholics in North America, where the pros and cons of reducing current restrictions on the practice have been debated for more than a decade.

When the previous world synod met, in September and October of 1980, to discuss family life, its discussions of Catholic teaching and pastoral practice regarding artificial birth control and divorce and remarriage captured the biggest news headlines. The U.S. and Canadian delegations figured prominently in those discussions.

But some of the most interesting and challenging interventions at that synod came from Asian and African bishops who questioned some basic Western cultural assumptions underlying the Church's sacramental and legal discipline for marriage.

Similar challenges to Western views of penance and reconciliation could come during the 1983 synod from representatives of non-Western cultures. To raise a strictly speculative example: bishops from African tribal societies that have more tight-knit community lives than are found in the West might provide new insights into the communal dimensions of sin and reconciliation, counterbalancing a Western tendency to think of sin and conversion primarily in terms of the individual's relationship with God.

Since the Synod of Bishops was established in 1965 as a means of periodically gathering representatives of the world's bishops to advise the pope on major Church issues, its role as a forum for expressing the cultural diversity within the Church has been one of its most notable features.

Of the 321 synod fathers, 45 are from Africa, 18 from North America, 46 from Latin America, 33 from Asia, 6 from Australia and Oceania, and the largest number, 73, from Europe.

In the United States the National Conference of Catholic Bishops elected as its delegates Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, who has also been at previous synods and is a member of the synod's 15-member council; Archbishop John R. Roach of St. Paul-Minneapolis, NCCB president; Archbishop Patrick Flores of San Antonio, Texas; and Auxiliary Bishop Austin Vaughan of New York.

Among his personal additions to the synod roster Pope John Paul named two Americans: Archbishop Edmund Szoka of Detroit and Cardinal Manning, whom he also named one of the synod's co-presidents.

Synods have their own internal rhythm. The first week is devoted primarily to prepared speeches, no more than eight minutes each, by the participants, who speak on whatever aspect of the theme they wish to emphasize.

The second and third weeks are devoted primarily to discussions, with the synod fathers divided into 11 small groups by language. There will be three English and three Spanish-Portuguese groups, two French, and one each in German, Italian and Latin.

The fourth week is devoted mainly to refining proposals through full assembly debate and voting.

In the past three synods these conclusions have not been officially released -- although they have always leaked out -- but they have been submitted to the pope for his use in writing a papal document to the whole Church on the topic.

Latin is the official language of the synod. It is used for the major ceremonies and speeches by key synod officials. But when delegates begin to deliver their speeches, Latin quickly disappears in favor of the major modern languages.

Synod proceedings themselves are closed to the press and the public. The Vatican Press Office hands out daily bulletins, provides daily press briefings in five languages for the international corps of journalists gathered to cover the event, and in the course of the meeting usually holds two or three major press conferences. But the information from all these is often quite sparse, and the public often learns the most about what is happening from press conferences that various synod delegations offer at intervals throughout the synod.

Although synods are consultative in nature -- they cannot make binding decisions for the Church unless the pope specifically empowers them to do so in a particular case -- they have come to play an important role in Church life.

Recommendations from each of the last three synods have resulted in major papal documents -- on evangelization, catechetics and family life -- which have had and will continue to have significant influence at all levels of Church life. Another synod set norms for revising the Code of Canon Law, and the revised code, issued earlier this year, clearly shows the imprint of the synod norms throughout. Other synods have affected priestly ministry, seminary formation, and Church action for peace and justice.

Fr. Albert Shamon



Word for Sunday

Bound In Memory

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Lk. 17/11-19. (R1) 2 Kgs. 5/14-17. (R2) 2 Tm. 2/8-13.

Please God, when this article appears, I shall be returning home from a pilgrimage to Rome. It is a well-known fact that every traveller returns home with more luggage than he or she started out with. As one journeys from country to country, one accumulates souvenirs galore. The variety is infinite; the merchants are eager to supply the tourist's needs.

Well, Naaman the leper set out for Israel. He was laden with gifts, but returned home with two mule loads of earth. That might puzzle us. Pagans believed their gods were locked to the land. Naaman believed the God of Israel was bound in a special way to the people and land of Israel. So he requested of the prophet some of the land of Israel in order to sacrifice in thanksgiving to the God of Israel.

The disease from which Naaman suffered was called "leprosy." In the Bible leprosy referred to any eruptive skin disease. The fearfulness of the disease was not only in the malady but in the isolation from human society which it imposed. In the gospel the ten lepers kept their distance from Jesus when seeking His help.

Because leprosy excluded one from the worshipping community, it was symbolic of sin. Healing, because it restored one to the people of God, was a sign of salvation. Jesus has healed us from the leprosy of sin. Therefore, Paul urged Christians to give thanks to the Lord, because He has delivered us from death to life.

It is so easy to forget what God has done for us. Somebody said the longest distance in the world is the one from one's head to one's heart. Is not this one of the basic problems of so many Christians? We know what God has done for us, but too often, like the other nine, our knowledge does not reach our

heart. Until it does we remain only creedal Christians.

That is why the Mass is so important. It helps us remember. It is like Naaman's souvenir--the earth on which he could give thanks to God.

One of the phrases at Mass that used to be hard to grasp was Jesus' command, "Do this in memory of me." Why remember? One day, it became clear. I was rummaging through some of the snapshots my twin brother, Father Ed, had taken on our various vacations together. There were pictures of us crossing the Atlantic on the SS Roma in 1950. Pictures of Barbados, of us sailing the Grenadines, or snorkeling in the Caribbean. As I looked at those happy, happy times, a wish slowly surfaced in my heart: "I wished Father Ed were still here so we could be happy together again, could vacation together." Tennyson expressed the yearning in his "Break, Break, Break" (his outcry to his heart at the loss of his dear friend, Arthur Hallam, who drowned in 1833)--"Oh for the touch of a hand that is gone...to hear a voice that is stilled."

That made it so clear to me why Jesus said celebrate Mass in memory of me. The gospel readings are the snapshots, the memories of Jesus. He wants us to remember so that we'll yearn for Him, so that the desire for Him to be with us now will arise in our hearts.

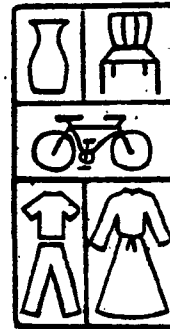
And, wonder of wonders, my desire for Father Ed's return remained but a desire, whereas our desire for Jesus' return becomes fulfilled at every Mass. For the Mass simply celebrates His presence, really and truly, among us. Memories, the Liturgy of the Word, create desire; and the Mass proper, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, fulfills the desire and makes it a reality.

And He comes to heal and to save all who come seeking, healing, and saving with the same deep hunger and thirst of a Naaman and a leprosy Samaritan.

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Editorial

Good

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Devil At Work

EDITOR:

In 1973, Christ, Pop agonized with that "the smo in the Church" "is a living b perverted and ... the No. unbelievable cu

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