

U.S. Bishops: Clarify General Absolution

Vatican City (NC) -- The four U.S. delegates to the 1983 world Synod of Bishops have asked for clarifications regarding the relationship between general absolution and individual confession.

In a carefully-worded statement which said the points raised do not represent any official position of the U.S. bishops, the U.S. delegates posed five questions. They were:

-- What does "a long time" mean when the church says that a priest may use general absolution "when the number of confessors does not suffice to hear individually all the penitents in the time available and when through no fault of their own those penitents would otherwise be deprived of sacramental grace or the Eucharist for a long time"?

-- Are danger of death and grave necessity the only times when the church wishes to authorize or may authorize general absolution?

-- Is there evidence of indiscriminate use of general absolution in the church?

-- Does fear of indiscriminate use make the church reluctant to use general absolution even when it might be legitimate and conducive to the good of the faithful?

-- How can the obligation of the subsequent confession of mortal sins that already have been forgiven through general absolution be shown to have grounds in human needs and rights as well as in the structure of the sacrament of penance itself?

The bishops' statement said the questions reflected their common faith and pastoral experience.

Their statement also strongly upheld the need for individual confession to meet basic human needs such as counsel and guidance.

In a press statement issued by Archbishop John Roach, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, said that the joint intervention does "not assume the answers to these questions in raising them."

"We believe that the synod can best serve its purpose through a well rounded discussion of all current questions pertaining to the sacrament of penance among which general absolution is one," it said.

The U.S. delegates are Archbishop Roach, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, Archbishop Patrick Flores of San Antonio and Auxiliary Bishop Austin Vaughan of New York.

Define Serious Sin, Moral Absolutes, Bishop Vaughan Asks

Vatican City (NC) -- The 1983 world Synod of Bishops should try to clarify the confusion about what constitutes serious sin and what constitutes Catholic moral absolutes, Auxiliary Bishop Austin Vaughan of New York said Oct. 4.

Bishop Vaughan, speaking in the name of the U.S. bishops, urged the synod to "face the pastoral question of how frequent -- or dangerous -- mortal sin is for people in our day."

He also said the synod should "face the pastoral question of the effect had on the sacrament of penance by dissent as to the binding force of practical norms, and what can be done about it."

Bishop Vaughan said, "It is not hard for most people to live with being told that there is no one Catholic position on a given matter, so they are free to reach their own conclusions within the framework of Christian principles. But it is intolerable for people to be told that they need not, or to be told by one authority that they are forbidden to do something, and by another that they may do it. In cases of this kind, many people stop seeking or accepting guidance at all."

After speaking on behalf of the U.S. hierarchy, Bishop Vaughan offered a personal view.

"I believe that the decline in the number of confessions is also tied in with a diminished sense of sin, of

the need for redemption and of the need for the mediation of the church to receive forgiveness for sin," he said.

He added that the decline is based on "a presumption that everyone or almost everyone will go to heaven" and the questioning of the reality of hell.

"We need a clear teaching on how real we think mortal sin is," said Bishop Vaughan.

"If we already have a clear teaching on this matter, then we need an effective apologetic for it," he said.



A New Focus on Reconciliation

By Jerry Filteau
NC News Service

The 1983 world Synod of Bishops is calling new attention to the Catholic Church's renewed rites of penance.

Here is an overview of what they are talking about as the month-long assembly at the Vatican of more than 200 of the world's bishops debates the relative values of the second rite over the first or the first over the third, or even suggests new forms of celebrating the sacrament.

The new Rite of Penance, following the Second Vatican Council's mandate for reform of the church's liturgical rites, was issued by the Holy See in December 1973. In March 1975 the English translation was approved.

Before that there was only one rite for the sacrament of penance: individual confession with individual absolution. The extraordinary form of absolution without individual confession was not considered a separate rite, but basically a pastoral response to an emergency situation in which a person or group of persons were in danger of death without reception of the sacrament because circumstances made confession impossible.

The revised ritual provides for three separate forms or rites of penance. It also expresses a preference for calling penance the "sacrament of reconciliation."

The first of these rites is that of individual confession and individual absolution. It is most similar to the ordinary rite of penance as it was celebrated before the reforms, although some elements have been changed to reflect greater emphasis on aspects of faith, prayer, reconciliation, healing and dialogue in the sacrament.

In the new rite the penitent may confess either anonymously, with the traditional screen between him and the priest, or seated face-to-face with the priest.

In the second rite of reconciliation, individual confession and absolution take place within the framework of a communal celebration. Such communal penance services are common in U.S. parishes particularly in the church's penitential seasons of Lent and Advent.

The communal penance service opens with song and prayer, followed by a liturgy of the word -- Scripture readings and a homily -- and a period of reflection. The assembly then prays together, making a general confession of sinfulness and praying a litany and the Our Father.

After the Our Father, members of the assembly may go to confession to priests stationed around the church, and each receives his penance and is individually absolved. "Collective absolution by a number of priests or general absolution by one priest is not permitted in this rite," says a study text on the new rite by the U.S. Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy.

The communal rite concludes with common prayers and songs of thanksgiving and a blessing by the presiding priest.

The third rite, which has evoked the most controversy in recent years, is that of general absolution without individual confession of sins. Emphasizing that individual confession and absolution is the ordinary form of the sacrament of penance, the church has established strict rules for the use of general absolution and strict conditions on the circumstances under which it can be allowed.

One of the rules is that penitents who receive absolution from serious sin in that form must go to confession at the earliest opportunity and confess any serious sins from which they were absolved by general absolution.

The third rite is like the second, except that general absolution replaces individual confession and absolution.

While some churchmen have argued for broader use of the third rite, often emphasizing its pastoral value for reconciling lapsed or alienated Catholics, others have refused to use it even in circumstances where it may be legitimate, citing the pastoral confusion that can result from the rite and the potential for its abuse.

In an effort to clear up the widespread confusion surrounding general absolution, the four synod delegates of the U.S. bishops' conference on Oct. 4 submitted a long memorandum to the synod, asking the assembled bishops from around the world to study and try to clarify five questions concerning the church's position on the use of general absolution and the restrictions on its use.

Cdl. Bernardin Proposes New Rite of Penance

Vatican City (NC) -- Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago asked the world Synod of Bishops to consider a new rite of penance modeled on the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. He proposed his idea in a written intervention he submitted Oct. 5.

Cardinal Bernardin told NC News that his idea is "somewhat radical" but not new, and it has been discussed widely by American liturgists.

It coincides, he said, with a recurring synod theme that the church must use "pastoral creativity to bring out the full richness and meaning of the sacrament" of penance.

His synod intervention, titled "The Sacrament of Penance in a Sacramental Church," suggested a revision of the ancient order of



penitents, modeled on the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).

In the intervention, Cardinal Bernardin proposed a four-stage rite which stresses the role of the parish in enabling conversion of its members.

In stage one, the penitent is prepared for the sacrament of penance "by members of the community such as spiritual directors, guides,

and sponsors, and through participation in events of community prayer," and then approaches the priest to make a full confession of sin, the cardinal said.

"Confession of sin enables the confessor to suggest proper courses of action," he said.

In step two, he said, the penitent, who has not yet been absolved of his sins, "sets about living a program of conversion." During this period, "the community continues to offer the same kind of support, especially the counsel of a spiritual director, and welcomes the penitent to events of community prayer."

In stage three, when the penitent has shown a profound change in his life, "the

time has come for the liturgical celebration of conversion in the sacrament of penance," Cardinal Bernardin said. The celebration, he added, should be according to the approved rites of the church with full community participation.

In the fourth stage, the penitent "continues to experience the prayerful support of the community and would have available a forum for dialoguing about the practical implications of a new way of life," he said.

Explaining his proposal to NC News, Cardinal Bernardin pointed to the successful use of the RCIA, a parish-oriented program to welcome adults into the church which has been widely acclaimed by liturgists and educators in the U.S. church.

He said that he felt parishes also could be similarly supportive of persons pursuing a program of conversion. Personal conversion, he noted, lies at the heart of the sacrament of reconciliation.

Cardinal Bernardin said that a main reason for proposing this was to highlight the fact that the sacrament of reconciliation cannot be seen in isolation.

He said that the proposed rite would not be for everyone and that he had not yet worked out the specifics of the proposal. He said, however, that the idea is theologically sound and that it is possible for the sacrament of reconciliation to be administered in stages, as his intervention proposes.

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